

# ROOTS IN BIRMINGHAM



*Edited by*  
Dr. John Ahern

*With*  
Randy Nissen  
Joyce Hutchison  
Julie Noone  
Kathy Wilson  
Judy Shumaker





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Friend and the recipient of The Dorothy  
Satre award.

God was whispering in your ear that  
Saturday. I hope you are always so  
blessed.

a friend,  
John



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**BIRMINGHAM CULTURAL CENTER**

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**The University of Toledo Urban Affairs Center**  
**and**  
**The Toledo-Lucas County Public Library**

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# Acknowledgments

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This book, which is the fourth and most lengthy work published by the Birmingham Cultural Center, happened because of the leadership of Dr. Ron Randall, Director of the Urban Affairs Center, the cosponsor of the Birmingham Cultural Center. He is a master at finding resources to do a project; his supervision style enhances the creative process and his ability to reinforce is matched only by his dedication to community. In all these endeavors he is supported by UAC administrative assistant, Lucy Gerlach, who always seems to have the right answers to questions. She enables one to get things done.

My involvement in The Birmingham Cultural Center and this book happened because Dr. Richard Perry recognized the importance of documenting and preserving the rich heritage of Birmingham. At the time the Center began, Dr. Perry was Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of Toledo and President of the Toledo-Lucas County Library Board of Trustees. His contribution was to utilize the resources available to him in those dual positions to create an environment in which The Birmingham Cultural Center could happen.

Randy Nissen, a Toledo public school teacher of history, was looking for an independent study to complete his Master's degree. When he approached me, I was starting the book and recognized the availability of a talented, young scholar. His work in interviewing, editing, typing and even locating a subject went far beyond the requirements of an independent study. He chose to go beyond what was expected. Like Dr. Perry and myself, his involvement with this wonderful community resulted

in not only greater respect for this unique neighborhood but also an abiding love for Birmingham.

Joyce Hutchison, a graduate assistant, asked to become involved and her interviews became a very important contribution to the book. She did research, typing and numerous activities that enhanced this work.

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Oral historians use the language that is recorded. Punctuation is used to clarify points as oral language is different from written language. I decided that in cases where a request was made, we would revise the transcripts to reflect a more traditional written narrative. Kathy Wilson, the last graduate assistant to work on this project, assumed this role. This was a more difficult task than it might appear. She edited and reedited until the participants were satisfied. The large number of participants that allowed us to publish their stories are included in this work because of Kathy's talents.

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# Introduction

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**B**irmingham is a place, but it is much more than that. This book will tell you what it is and what it has meant to those with roots in Birmingham. But place is the best way to begin for it was Birmingham's location on the Maumee River that caused it to become a neighborhood.

Birmingham came to be because factories were built along its eastern border, the Maumee River. Factories related to the steel industry needed convenient housing for their workers. The neighborhood developers chose the name Birmingham, not only because of the steel industry, but also because Birmingham, England, symbolized jobs. It connoted work and when Birmingham was developed that symbol was far more appealing than a Fair View, a Garden Place or a Sylvan Woods. People came here to work and so Birmingham was a good name for this place. And there was never a need to change it.

Boundaries change. Today Birmingham's southern extreme is Interstate 280. It is ironically symbolic since the growth of the interstates and the affluence that enabled families to own one and often two or more cars had much to do with the decline of ethnic neighborhoods and the popularity of suburbs. The City of Oregon, Birmingham's eastern border, is such a suburb. A glance at the names of Oregon's elected officials or the graduating classes of its public or parochial high school gives evidence that this suburb became a destination for many with roots in Birmingham. More than one observer has said that Oregon is a suburb of Birmingham.

To the north is the Port of Toledo. It once was a neighborhood like Birmingham, but the community of Ironville was eliminated. It was bulldozed because of misguided dreams of attracting more industry to Toledo.

Local historians may debate the birthday of Birmingham, but shortly before the turn of the century approximates its beginning. The factories came first and then, the people. It was a time when immigration was encouraged. People were needed to do hard labor in America's expanding industries. Agents were sent to Hungary and what once was Czechoslovakia to recruit workers. The pattern of immigration

varied; but it was not unusual for a man and perhaps his older sons to come here, “find work,” save money and then send for his wife and children to come to America. Later, intact families would come. Since this neighborhood had become known as a good place for jobs, others from that village in Europe would move here. They were rural people who successfully made the transition to urban America.

They lived in modest houses built by real estate speculators. Architectural preservationists would later call these houses “worker cottages.” They were small houses, one story high, that initially were without a basement or plumbing. Backyards were small and front lawns were smaller. Some backyards had a smoke house and others had chickens in residence. In time, the privies were demolished and many garages were built. Since the lots were narrow the garages faced the alley. At first, some houses were without porches but that omission changed quickly. It became a neighborhood characterized by front porches. It did not take much time before the empty lots were filled with modern bungalows and the muddy streets were paved. So many male immigrants were arriving that a number of the small houses served early on as boarding houses. With the new arrivals, and because families were large, Birmingham came to be densely populated.

Some say that there were taverns on every corner, which were outnumbered only by family grocery stores. Whether a tavern or grocery store, the proprietors lived upstairs “above the store.” There were bakeries, banks, travel agencies, even dry good stores, as well as doctors’ offices. More often than not, the owners “lived above the store.”

One never needed to leave Birmingham. Many residents were born in Birmingham as there were midwives living in the neighborhood. Since most merchants spoke Hungarian, there was not a need for women who worked at home to learn English. Many did not. When they went to church or buried their dead, the clergy could and did speak the old language. Hungarian was so pervasive that African Americans (who have lived in Birmingham for many years prior to the construction of public housing) tell of the need to learn the language as it was the language of the work place, the factory floor. Just as the children had to learn English in order to survive in the outside world, initially in Birmingham, one had to master Hungarian to survive in the world of the factory.

For those who do not have ethnic roots, it is often difficult to understand the deep attachment of people to the language and country of their forefathers’ birth. Perhaps it is even more difficult to appreciate that the love of their homeland continues in

later generations. Yet, this love is well known to Toledo travel agents who have booked many excursions to central Europe for people with roots in Birmingham.

You will also see examples of pride in being American and in being Hungarian if you visit what is now Calvin United Church of Christ or St. Stephen's Church and look at the stained glass windows. You will find two symbols: a stylized American shield and a Hungarian shield. It is not divided loyalty; it is concurrent loyalty.

This dual loyalty, this love of two lands, is best understood by those who are married. You never stop loving your parents even though you leave the home of your birth to live in another place and to love, in a different way, your spouse. Although Hungary was on the wrong side in both World Wars, the people of Birmingham took great pride in their purchase of war bonds and even greater pride in their sons who died fighting for their new homeland. Each of the churches has built (more prominently than one might find in other neighborhoods) a monument to those who died for America. At Zion Hill Baptist church, which once was St. Michael's, the monument remains although the original congregation whose sons it honors has gone. This tribute to the dead Hungarian American soldiers remains in Birmingham. It is fitting that, when the move was made to Oregon, to an American suburb, the testimonial stayed in the neighborhood that had made those soldiers American.

In the beginning, living in America but maintaining traditions from the old country was not done out of ethnic pride. There was not an attempt to preserve a heritage. It was simply a way one lived life; it was the way one did things. The rites of passage, the acknowledgement of the changing seasons was done here as it had been done elsewhere because it was what one did. It was also fun; it made you feel good.

Summer was greeted by the Corpus Christi procession, the young girls in white dresses and boys in their best clothing marching down the street to pray at highly decorated outdoor altars set up in front of homes. Flowers were scattered on the street. Tree trunks were painted because that made them look cleaner.

Although vacant lots and back yard gardens generated much food, the harvest dance rather than any gathering of crops marked the end of summer in Birmingham. It was a celebration. Children dressed in traditional costumes marched behind a band that was on a wagon (later a truck) to inform everyone--not that they didn't already know--that the Harvest Dance was happening that night. At the dance hall, grapes would be strung from a temporary arbor, and adults would dance the Csardas. While dancing, they would attempt to steal grapes. The young children were responsible for



arresting the culprits. Everyone was caught, for that was part of the fun. The culprits would be brought to the “the judge” who would levy a fine. The proceeds were given to a good cause.

Christmas was not only a celebration of the birth of Christ but also the time for the reenactments of the Abauj Bethlehem, a medieval play. It was a street play whose final performance was at Midnight Mass. The players, shepherds and oregs--devilish men who had not yet discovered Christ--visited homes and sang of Christ and collected donations of money, food and wine. The money was given to the church; the food, to the convent; and (I was told by the players) the wine just mysteriously disappeared. The players in the white gowns and conical hats were shepherds, but the oregs were dressed in bizarre furry costumes with masks. It was an honor to be playing the oreg. When the players visited the homes the oregs would frighten the children. But children are complex; and, as in other times and places, they delighted in being frightened. The children knew that they were really safe because the parents were there and they were laughing. The parents were remembering their childhood. But, I’ve been told it was scary.

Many are surprised to learn that March 17, the birthday of St. Patrick, is celebrated in Birmingham. While the Irish of Toledo are visiting local pubs, the people of St. Stephen’s have traditionally participated in a solemn novena at this time to honor the Blessed Virgin Mary. The prayers celebrate the Hungarians’ Irish Madonna. It is an interesting story. During the time of the persecution of Roman Catholics in Ireland by the British, many of the clergy escaped to Europe. Bishop Lynch was given sanctuary by the Bishop of Gyor in Hungary. Bishop Lynch was made an auxiliary Bishop of that diocese and died there. After his death, it was reported that a painting he gave to his benefactors was seen to have a bloody sweat for three hours. A copy of that painting was given by the Bishop of Toledo to St. Stephen’s Church.

Easter, the central event of Christianity, was also a time of traditions for the people of Birmingham. On Palm Sunday, parishioners at St. Stephen’s brought pussy willows to church to be blessed as they had done in Hungary, where palms were not to be had. Baskets of Easter food wrapped in the native embroidery were brought to the church on the Saturday before Easter to be blessed. The traditional skills of decorating Easter eggs were practiced. This was the time when fasting and sacrificing were finally over. It was a time of jubilation. It climaxed at Easter services on Easter Sunday. But, the Monday following Easter brought a change in spirit. It was the day of dousing.

The dousing custom originated in Hungary. In the villages, young men would chase women and throw buckets of water at them or drop them in a horse trough. Some of that continued in Birmingham, but for many it became more dignified and stylized. Young men, and later boys, would request permission to sprinkle the young lady of the house. Sometimes it would be done with a bottle of perfume, other times with a less expensive home-made concoction. The male would enter the bedroom, where the daughter would be resting, and he would gently sprinkle her. Sometimes the sprinklers would be given coins or Easter eggs. By the 1950's, some boys would merely fill water balloons and throw them at girls. On Tuesday the girls chased the boys and attempted to douse them. Although I don't think it is true, I have been told that for a time the U.S. Mail was not delivered in Birmingham on Easter Tuesday!

The rites of passage, like events that marked the changing of seasons, also were centered around the church. When you entered life, you were baptized a Christian. When you reached young adulthood, you were confirmed. But when people from Birmingham tell outsiders about special events, it is the marriages that seem to be the most remembered rite of passage. Although there were divorces, they were rare. Marriages were for keeps and for bearing children. Not all marriages were large gatherings. I have been told that they were far less than one might imagine. And not all marriages were in the church, but the memories of the large church weddings seem to be the ones most cherished by the community.

As in other times and places, a Birmingham wedding was a joyous time. It celebrated optimism about the future, the pride of the successful parents and, of course, the joy of the young lovers; but it was also a celebration of continuity, for marriage implies procreation and birth. It is a public manifestation that the community will not die. Thus, weddings were a community celebration in Birmingham.

Once there was news of the marriage, people were anxious for the male members of the wedding party to approach their doors bearing a ceremonial cane tied with ribbons. That is how the invitation to the wedding was extended.

In the earliest days, the weddings would last for days. Gypsy orchestras would play. Beer and wine would flow freely. I have been told, in fact, that at one time marriages at St. Stephen's could take place only early in the week because the pastor did not want any parishioners to attend Sunday Mass who might be suffering from the consequences of too much celebrating at a wedding.

Death, the final rite of passage, has been well documented in this book. The church bells of St. Stephen's rang when it was known that a member of the congregation had died. There was one sequence for a man, another for a woman. In the time between death and burial there was a vigil, a time when men stayed at the deceased's home guarding the body as a tribute to a lost friend. During the night, they talked of their loss but they also played cards, told stories and drank beer. After the funeral, if the person had been somewhat affluent or important, a band would proceed the procession to the end of Birmingham.

Bands, beer, and card playing are not what we might associate with burial rites. Yet, this was a community with profound religious convictions. Birmingham believed not only that there was a life after death, but also that all of a person's time on earth was a preparation for the hereafter. Life was cherished and enjoyed, but the community believed it was all nothingness compared to what awaited one after death. Thus, there was grief because the community had lost a member, but there was also an awareness of the joy that the departed was experiencing. Birmingham's religious commitments not only helped the people survive hard times but also gave them a strength and an outlook that some of us can only admire.

This book is designed to introduce you to some of the people who helped to define Birmingham. You will meet people who, despite the odds, have been successful in preserving and enhancing traditions of dance, embroidery, cuisine, folk tales and festivals, as well as nourishing religious traditions. Those are not easy things to do.

I believe a hero is a person to be admired for brave deeds and noble qualities, someone who can serve as a model or ideal. In this book, you will meet some of my heroes.

Dr. John F. Ahern, Director  
Birmingham Cultural Center  
March, 1997



Judy (Farkas) Balogh 8/14/87

## Judy (Farkas) Balogh

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*Interviewed by Dr. John Ahern*

**M**y parents were both born in Hungary. My mother, Barbara, was born in the northern part, which is now Slovakia, and my father, Bertalan Farkas, was born in Miskolc, Hungary. My father arrived on the *Carpethia* at Ellis Island on December 3, 1908 with his first wife, Elizabeth. They left New York by train for Toledo.

My mother, Barbara Petroczi and her three-year-old, Yolan "Lola" Petroczi, came November 31, 1909 on board the *Pennonnia* similarly bound for Ellis Island. My mother, too, was married before she met my father in the United States. She lost her first husband in Czechoslovakia. The very same evening that she buried her husband, she gave birth to my oldest half-sister, Lola, who was born January 26, 1906. Together they both traveled to Toledo to stay with her sister, my Aunt Ester Barta, who lived at 1939 Genesee Street. Aunt Ester introduced my mother to some of the wealthier families in Toledo with whom she was familiar by means of doing housework in the Old West End. While Ester was at work, Lola would be left at home with Ester's children. Later, Lola would have a baby-sitter.

My father, Bertalan Farkas, worked in Toledo at the old brickyard on Consaul Street by the railroad tracks. He never liked working in a factory or any kind of supervised work because in those days, it seemed the only way to move ahead was by doing favors for the supervisor. Employees would bring in jugs of wine or whiskey to the supervisor. My father never believed in that. He believed in hard work and doing a good job, so he didn't like the idea of gifts. One incident that really upset my father was when a fellow worker told his supervisor that his wife was expecting him for lunch. My father made up his mind. If the only way to get ahead was by inviting the supervisor home to have his wife entertain him, he wanted no part of it.

### **Louisiana**

In those days, there was the *Hungarian Szabadsag*, a newspaper for Hungarian-Americans, published in Cleveland, Ohio. It contained ads for jobs throughout the United States. Many Hungarians were going to West Virginia, to the coal mines. So, my father decided he would try coal mining. He just couldn't tolerate working

underground. He looked again in the *Szabadsag*. Within the paper, there was advertising encouraging Hungarians to settle in Louisiana. They were seeking migrants, especially Hungarians, Italians, and Germans to settle in the Louisiana area to farm. Property could be purchased cheaply. He went with his wife, Elizabeth, and leased property. He liked it there because of the warm climate. They started raising cotton, but that didn't work out well. So, they started other crops, finally ending up with strawberries. After two years, Elizabeth died while giving birth.

He started corresponding with my mother in Toledo. He had known her in Hungary. He told her he knew that she was struggling with a child and that if she would come to Louisiana, he would like her to become his wife. That is how my mother and half-sister, Lola, happened to move to Louisiana. The name of the community is Albany, but the area where the Hungarians settled was later named "Arpadhon." It was named after Arpad, a chief, who led the Hungarians against invaders. (King Stephen was the great grandson of Arphad.) Arpadon is about 60 miles northwest of New Orleans and is 36 miles east of Baton Rouge, the state capital.

My father was the only Hungarian from Toledo that stayed there. Other families from Toledo didn't like farming. Many of them were from Cleveland and the Detroit area. Later, when we came to Toledo, we were known as the "Southern Hillbillies."

My father married my mother in 1912 and my sister, Elizabeth, was born one year later. Together they had nine children. I had a sister and a brother who died in Louisiana. We lived a very hard life on the farm. We had our chores. We had to chop our own wood. We had horses, cattle, chickens, ducks, geese, and pigs. The youngest children always had to gather the eggs and the older ones had to chop the wood.

## Schooling

We had to wake up at five o'clock in the morning and work two hours before school. We Farkas children were always late for school. The principal would be standing by the school door and he would say, "You're late again."

We'd say, "Sorry but we have been working." About thirty percent of the students were Hungarian, the rest were Americans born in Louisiana. We could never participate in basketball or any of the sports activities after school because when school let out at two o'clock, my father would be there with our truck to pick us up to make sure that we didn't waste any time playing on the way home.

## **Farm Life**

Many of the Louisiana residents resented Hungarians because we were hard working immigrants. Our neighbors had property yet they would raise just enough food for themselves like corn, sweet potatoes and a little cotton. They never really worked to make progress, to really make money. They would see us out working early morning until late at night while they would be sitting on their porches in their rocking chairs. When it got too hot, they didn't work. We did. We worked whether it was raining or whether the temperature was 110 or 15. Whatever the climate, we always worked. We didn't have the machinery they have now on farms. Everything had to be done by hand or horse power. I couldn't wait to leave because the strawberries required twelve months of labor.

Strawberries are raised differently in Louisiana than they are in Ohio. Plants are planted individually each fall. We had thirty-eight acres of strawberries, which is a large crop for strawberries in that area. We had African-Americans working for us. They were part of our family. We shared our chickens, our eggs, or whatever we had with them. We played together; we were raised together. We used to have as many as twenty-six African-Americans who worked for us during the strawberry season. We had a beautiful relationship. We knew their family history.

## **Hungarian Culture in Louisiana**

I can't remember the actual population of the Hungarian settlement there, but when I came to Toledo, there were more Hungarians in Toledo than in Louisiana. I can remember as a child, it was not considered proper to marry an "American born." Both partners had to be Hungarian. Our parents were very strict about that.

We had two Hungarian churches. The Catholic Church was Saint Margaret's and the Presbyterian Church was called the Hungarian Reformed Church. We had summer school and we had to go. There we had Bible study classes about how to read and write in Hungarian. The traditions and customs were maintained more rigorously in Louisiana than in Toledo. For example, when we came to Toledo, the only time Hungarian costumes were worn was for the Harvest Festival.



## **The Paprikash Weiz**

When we first moved to Toledo, they didn't have embroidery classes like they do now. We learned how to embroider from our mothers. My mother had very little time, but she never sat idle without doing something. She used to send away to New York for a magazine called the *Paprikash Weiz*. It was from a famous Hungarian export house in New York which still exists. They used to send out catalogs to Hungarians across the United States. Paprikas, Hungarian flower seeds, embroidery patterns and other Hungarian products could be ordered. She used to send away for patterns which could be used on pillow cases. In the evening, my mother would sit down and show me how to embroider and crochet. That is how I learned to darn socks, make buttonholes, sew on buttons and mend our clothes. It was a pleasure and it was fun working and learning from Mother. Her hands and fingers were victims of hard labor. But her needles created beautiful, perfect stitches.

## **First Job**

A small ice cream company from New Orleans opened up while we still lived in Albany and I always wanted to do something besides farm work.

They had a little ad in their window for help and, without my father's consent, in May of 1941, I applied for the job. I was told that in order to work there, I had to be sixteen years old and I wouldn't become sixteen until the following September. So I lied on the application and they gave me the job. That was in 1942, the year all the troops were on maneuvers down south. They would pass through Albany to go to Lake Charles. All these troops would stop in for ice cream, so I got to meet many soldiers from the 37th Ohio division.

Eventually, my employer did find out that I wasn't sixteen, but the company told me they thought I was doing a wonderful job and did not fire me. They were opening another store about twelve miles outside of Albany and they wanted me to move there and run the store. Imagine me sixteen years old and running a store! I was delighted. I just couldn't believe it. I said, "Oh yes. I'll take it." But my father wouldn't hear of me moving away from home. I couldn't commute because we only had one car. We were raised very strictly and he said, "No way are you going to be moving away from home and working twelve miles away, while the rest of the family works on the farm!" Because my father didn't approve, I couldn't take the job.

## **Working in Toledo**

I was the blonde in the family. I read all these movie magazines and thought all it took to be a movie star was to be blonde. (What a dream!) I felt if I could get away from Albany, maybe somehow, I could become a movie star. That was a big joke. I didn't know if I had any talent, but I was blonde and that was going to be my ticket to Hollywood. That was one of my dreams; what a dream! In the meantime, I got sick and the doctor told my father that I was anemic and that the climate in Louisiana was too hot for me. So, I moved to Toledo in 1942. I lived with my sister on Genesee Street. She came to Toledo in 1936 to marry Gilbert Barta. She was the first member of our family to leave Louisiana for Toledo.

My parents were going to stay in Louisiana, but when war broke out in 1941, my two brothers were drafted. It was difficult to find farm labor and my parents were getting older. So, in 1943, they sold the farm and moved to Toledo. I moved in with them and we bought the house on the corner of Burr and Consaul Streets. It is the large, brick house at 1978 Burr Street. It had been owned by the Veszelska family, which was a very well known family in Toledo. They sold the home to my parents and that is where they lived until they passed away (Father in 1963 and Mother in 1970.)

## **New Beginnings**

My first job in Toledo was at Kresge's on the corner of Adams and St. Clair. I operated the little sandwich counter. But I felt that I wanted to help the war effort. I submitted my application to various factories in the area. The only place they would hire me was at Libbey Glass. Glass production was not really war production. Once I got started, though, I met some of the Hungarian girls and the Polish girls who were working there and I felt right at home. Two of my friends were Mary Bence, who was from Birmingham, and Laura Sudek, a Polish girl. They both joined the WACS. My brother, John, was stationed at Camp Hood in Texas. I wrote him that I was seriously considering joining the service. He immediately wrote back, "This is no place for women. This is a man's war." That put an end to that.

We were manufacturing glassware at Libbey Glass but again, I wanted to do something that was going to directly help the war effort, like working on airplanes or ammunition. I turned in my application to Doehler Jarvis, and my supervisor at Libbey Glass found out that I was going to quit. When I returned, he called me into his office and said, "Please don't quit. We are going to be making 'ampoules' (for serums included in the medical supplies). It is going to be war work and we need

help.” Everyone was going where the big money was like Dana, Doehler Jarvis, Jeep, Spicer, Autolite, Champion, and others. I was one of the first employees to work with the glass tubing. They made the glass tubing elsewhere, but they shipped them to Libbey Glass to be cut into various sizes for the different medications. I was one of the first employees to do that at Libbey Glass. I worked there until they discontinued production at the end of the war, when they began converting to TV tubes.

The Libbey employees who were from the production plants were laid off after the war because the men were coming back and they needed their jobs. Most of the women were laid off at other factories, but I still had my job at Libbey Glass. I always made less than those doing war work at the other factories, but at least I still had my job at Libbey Glass. We went right back into glassware, TV tubes and bottling. My job was decorating Coca-Cola glasses.

## **Language**

We always spoke Hungarian at home, but we always spoke English outside our home. When we were in the presence of my parents, we had to speak Hungarian. I thought that since my parents were here in America, they should learn to speak the language. They did learn just enough to get by, but they really didn't speak English fluently. I wasn't any different than the rest of the young people in Birmingham. Our classmates and friends made fun of us for speaking another language at home and I was embarrassed to speak Hungarian to my parents in front of my friends.

## **Courtship**

Al, my husband, was a very handsome, husky, healthy-looking man and all of his friends were in the service. After the war started, everywhere he went people would ask, “Why aren't you in the service? My son is in the service and you are a big, healthy-looking young man and you should be in the service.” People called him a draft dodger. He didn't make any excuses, but his mother told the Selective Service branch that he had rheumatic fever when he was thirteen. She said that it did not affect his heart at the time, but, eventually, if it would reoccur, it would cause serious heart damage. Little did Al know that she had obtained this information from the official doctor's report. Al thought that she was only trying to keep him out. He thought that she didn't want him to go to the service because she was a widow and, at that time, he was her sole supporter.

He got tired of people making remarks, so he spoke to a military physician who proceeded to give him a physical. He explained that his mother had fabricated the excuse (he told me this after we had been married several years). He joined the paratroopers, which, given his health problems, was one of the worst branches he could have chosen. Nevertheless, he trained in Texas and, after his training, he was scheduled to be sent overseas. While doing one of his last jumps of training, he got rheumatic fever. He was hospitalized in Oregon State Hospital for about six months. Naturally, they discharged him and he came home before the war was over with some damage to his heart.

At that time, I was still living with my sister. I can remember Al going down Genesee Street. He knew there was a new girl in the neighborhood. He just heard that I was from the South. I hadn't met him yet, but I would be sitting on the porch after work and I would hear his car coming down Genesee Street. When he would be passing the house, he would just "gun" the car and look back with a grin, and I thought, "Who is this jerk?" I would get so mad whenever I would hear this car coming that I would pick myself up and go into the house. I didn't know who he was, but this racing down Genesee Street was his daily routine.

After my parents moved to Toledo, I met Mary Lou Szabo. She was my neighborhood girlfriend who lived three doors over. She and I were very close and we would go to the Paramount Theater on Sundays. We would go to three or four different shows on Sunday because we didn't have anything else to do during wartime. On Sunday evenings, we would go to the Rumpus Room, which was on Consaul Street. They had an orchestra which would play on Saturdays and Sundays. Later, it was turned into a bowling alley. It was a bar and had a nightclub and that is where the young people would hang out.

Rose (Bartus) Besase and Mary Lou knew all the boys in the neighborhood. One Sunday night, Frank Balogh came in with Al. The minute he walked in and I saw the big grin on his face, I knew that he was the guy who was racing down Genesee Street. Mary Lou asked, "Would you like to meet Frank Balogh?" I said, "Yes." And she called him over. Frank introduced me to Al. (They had the same last name but they were not related. Frank still lives on Dearborn Avenue.) After that introduction, we would "accidentally" meet at the Rumpus Room. The guys actually knew we were going there and they would walk us home. That started our courtship and a flame in my heart.



Our dates were to downtown to the show on the bus. We would go to the Paramount and stop for hamburgers afterwards at Kewpees or sometimes we would go to Joe Packo's which was on the corner from the Paramount. The courtship lasted about one year and then we were married on June 28, 1947, by Father Reineck.

## **Marriage**

Al's mother always handled the money. She would give him ten dollars for a date. Al was serving an apprenticeship at Autolite at the time and I was making more money at Libbey Glass than he was. His mother was very strict with both of the boys, Al and his brother Elmer. She didn't want them to drink, so she would only give them an allowance when they were going on dates. After I met Al's mother, she told me that when Al would come home from our dates, he always had money left over. She liked that and knew I was the girl he should marry. (I always drank Coca-Colas.) When we went out,

Al would have his beer and I would only have my Cokes. We would simply grab hamburgers or hot dogs and some chips. Al's mom knew I didn't smoke or drink; she thought I was perfect for him. I had a beautiful relationship with Al's mom.

Al got down on his knees the old typical way, to ask me to marry him. I didn't think he would do it, but he did. I didn't really expect it at the time, but our relationship was serious and we really loved each other. He asked my dad for his permission to marry me and it was granted.

My parents did not object even though we were of different religions. They told us they would never interfere with our marriage decisions. They assured us that it was up to us. On this subject, my father said, "The only thing we ask of you is, if you have problems, don't come home with any complaints. It is to be settled between you and your mate. You made your bed, you lie in it."

## **Memories of Special Days**

In Louisiana they upheld the Hungarian traditions more so than in Toledo. When I was a child (before they had halls to rent for weddings), they used to make canopies for outdoor weddings. I can only remember my dad getting drunk at big weddings. The Hungarian Reformed Church always had Fourth of July picnics. That was the place to celebrate the Fourth. It was an important holiday for both Americans and Hungarians. Another important date was March 15, the Hungarian Independence Day. We would always have a big dinner or celebration at the Hungarian Reformed

Church. At these dinners, there would always be a recitation of a poem by Petofi Sandor, the Hungarian freedom fighter. This was always an important event. My sister, Lola, was one of the first young girls to recite the poem *Talpra Magyar* when she was five or six years old.

On Good Friday, we didn't eat any meat. It was always noodles or fish. On Saturday, while we were preparing our dinners for Easter Sunday, we would sit with my mother and dye the Easter eggs.

On Easter Sunday we always had ham and sausages and the usual Hungarian dishes with the Easter eggs. We also ate the Hurka Kolbasz. Hurka is made with rice, liver, and some of the meat from the head of the pig. It is seasoned with salt, pepper, onions, and marjoram. We also had pork cutlets that were fixed to make different dishes.

## **Dousing**

The first day after Easter Monday, the young men would go and douse the girls. My uncles and cousins were always the first to come to our house. I had four cousins and they couldn't wait to come because they loved to douse, but we tried to hide. (I was about ten or twelve years old when this happened.) If you ran away and fought it, you would get doused with a bucket of water. A lot of the young boys loved to do that. When I was older, the boys from the neighborhood would come. They came early in the morning. I would be in bed and they would sprinkle us with scented water.

After a girl was doused, she would bring out her painted eggs. The boy would pick out some dyed eggs and they were his reward. Two or three would come at one time. They also knew that they might be given something to drink, a little shot of whiskey or strawberry wine. That was a big deal for those boys. The girls would brag about how many eggs they had given away. If a boy was a favorite of the girl's father, he was sure to be given a shot of whiskey or wine.

The boys used to recite an old poem when they doused but not all of the boys remembered the poem. The older Hungarians who came from Hungary would always recite it. The poem was about a man walking in a garden or in the woods who sees a wilted flower and asks permission to sprinkle it so that it could come back to life and bloom.



On Easter Tuesday some girls doused boys but they did not go over to the boys' homes. Girls felt a bit awkward about that. We would meet at church services or at the Community Hall at our Hungarian Reformed Church or at St. Margaret's Church. If someone could not afford perfume, they used Johnson's Baby Powder diluted with water.

I was only doused by my husband Al once because we only dated for one year. He had to work on Easter Monday, so after work he came over and doused me. He brought a little pail with him and I said, "No. You are not going to pour that whole thing." He did. He got the biggest kick out of that because he just used regular water and poured it over me. At least it happened out in the back yard. The next day, I went over to his house to get my revenge but he wasn't home. I was very disappointed. I guessed that he knew I was coming. After we were married, he got doused every year.

## **Christmas**

In Louisiana, we always had a butchered pig on Easter and Christmas. We would butcher the pig in the morning and after all the food was prepared, we would go out in the Louisiana pine woods by our farm and find our Christmas tree. Then we would bring it home and decorate it for Christmas Eve. We couldn't wait to get the tree up. We had real candles because we did not have electricity. The tree stayed up until after Epiphany. These were my happiest memories of home in Louisiana.

## **Harvest Dance**

When I first came to Toledo I thought the Harvest Dance Celebration was going to be like the dances we had in Louisiana. There all the boys and girls joined in and started rehearsing in early July to learn all the dances. It was always at St. Margaret's Catholic Church but Protestants as well as Catholic girls and boys would attend. All were welcome. It was like a community hall. We all wore the national costume which is green, red, and white. It had pleated skirts with red, white and green ribbons with little aprons, red vests, and a head piece. The boys wore black pants with white shirts and hats with red, white, and green ribbons.

In the afternoons, we would all meet at the hall and string the grapes. They put all the fruits on the arbor and in the middle would be a big jug of homemade strawberry wine. Also, they would decorate the punch bowl with red, green, and white ribbons and they hung grapes in the arbor. Sometimes my father would donate the jug. There

was also the tradition of the “stealing of the grapes.” It was like a game to grab some grapes from the arbor. You were supposed to get caught. The boys and girls in the dance troupe would watch out for the grape thieves. When the thief was caught, he or she was taken to the judge. The judge would then tell the thief what he or she owed. The fines were then donated to the church. The wine was also auctioned off to the highest bidder. This was a great celebration and so much fun!

I expected the same type of things to take place at Birmingham’s Harvest Festival. When I went, I only saw a few people wearing traditional costumes and everyone else was in plain clothes. People danced to Hungarian music and that was it. In the 1950s, after the formation of the Magyar Dancers, many of the older traditions were revived at the dances.

### **Embroidery Classes**

I started my embroidery because of my mother. She started me when I was a little girl. She sent away for the patterns and started teaching me when I was about five years old. I always embroidered but never as extensively as I have since 1978 when Father Hernady invited Irene Eber from Budapest,

Hungary. St. Stephen’s paid her way to come to Toledo to teach Hungarian embroidery. We had classes at St. Stephen’s and at Calvin United Church of Christ. She brought her patterns from Hungary and introduced us to the designs. The only ones that the classes were interested in were the Matyo patterns from North Eastern Hungary and the Kalocsa patterns from the Mid South Eastern region. The Kalocsa pattern is especially lovely because it has flowers like roses and violets and usually it features a paprika plant because Hungary is noted for its paprika.

Irene went back to Hungary but she returned to Toledo again two years later to make sure that we were continuing the classes; however, St. Stephen’s dropped them. I felt that somebody needed to teach them so that we could pass this tradition on to the new generation. So, I took it upon myself to start teaching them at Calvin United in 1978. I have been teaching ever since. Irene came back in 1978 and again in 1980 to check up on us. Since then we have classes every year from September to May and people from all religious denominations are members. As many as 60% of the students are not Hungarian. We started at Calvin United and then we moved to the Hungarian Club, but after the fire at the Club we went back to Calvin United. (Because of the new lighting fixture at the Club after the rebuilding, we were relocated to the Calvin United Church basement hall.). I have classes there from 2:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. every Monday and from 6:30 to 8:30 in the evenings. I have people coming from as

far as Lorain and Michigan to take the classes. It continues to grow. When people come to the Birmingham Ethnic Festival they see the costumes, the blouses and the different embroidery and they get interested and they want to join our classes.

I have lost some of my most dedicated students. Every year there are at least two that pass away. The oldest one I have is 79 years old. Her name is Maria Bozso and she is just fantastic. The embroidery is her whole life and she tells me, "I don't know what I would ever do if you discontinued these embroidery classes." This gives me a lift and encourages me to go on. I have memories of the girls that did not even know a stitch of embroidery. I hated to see them discouraged, so I used to work with them very diligently to make sure they would keep coming back. I showed them how to select their colors for each flower. Some of these girls wound up doing better than girls that had been doing this for years.

## **Memories**

When I went to Hungary in 1981, I visited the Matyo Museum to learn more about embroidery. Once inside the museum, I was captivated with all the beautiful embroidery. While there, I had two days of classes with one of the instructors. I learned about how to coordinate colors and how to select flowers for each pattern. They were so excited about my coming from America to learn their art form. One of the artists, a woman I had classes with, paints walls in this gorgeous Kalocsa pattern. When I met her, she was demonstrating it in a little village. I was so intrigued I just sat there and watched how she created this beautiful art. That is what really started my interest. I knew it was something we should teach the children in Toledo who have Hungarian backgrounds. (Most of the people from Birmingham come from the Eastern and Western areas of Hungary.)

I have been going back to Hungary every year and I bring back new patterns. My first trip to Hungary was in 1974, after my husband passed away. I owe that to Father Hernady; he encouraged me to go. I was at an uncle's funeral and I met Father, who was planning a trip to Hungary. He said, "Judy, it would be nice for you to get away and I know you were always planning to go to Hungary with your husband." (We were never able to make that trip together because in 1967, he got cancer and was ill for five years.) I told Father, "I don't have a partner." Then he told me he knew a woman from the parish who was going and suggested that I talk with her. The woman was Lillian Keil and we developed a wonderful friendship. We discovered that our parents were from the same county in Hungary.

That was our first trip to Hungary. It was at a time when Hungary was ruled by a communist government and so things were very strict there. We were warned about what we could and could not do. When we got to Hungary, I met some of my relatives for the first time. I was able to visit my mother's village and saw the house where my mother and my oldest sister Lola were born. I also saw the little church where my mother was baptized and married before she came to the United States. Everything appeared exactly like my mother described it. It was as if I had been there before. The summer of 1994 was my eighteenth trip. Each time I do things a little differently. This last summer we went for Toledo's sister city, Szeged's trade fair. We had two jeeps from Toledo that were driven to Szeged from Budapest. On this trip I was elected vice president of "Sister City Szeged."

In the spring of 1975 I went on my second trip to Hungary. Lola Farkas, Elizabeth Barta, my two oldest sisters and I went to Hungary and Czechoslovakia to visit relatives and explore our roots. In Remaszombat, my mother's village, we had the privilege to meet and visit with relatives living in the two hundred-year-old houses where both my mother and sister Lola were born. To Lola this event and the trip was a dream come true. It was an unforgettable experience.

## **Housing**

When we were first married we lived at 2313 Caledonia Street. We lived with my mother-in-law. I was like any other married woman. I wanted my own home. But my mother-in-law was a fantastic person and I learned a lot from her. We cooked Hungarian meals together. She showed me how to make Hungarian soup and she told me I cooked better soup than she did. We made apple strudel and pastries too.

In 1951 we moved from Birmingham to Harvest Lane. It was our first little house and we lived there for five years. Then we moved to Haddington Drive (one street east of Harvest).

We liked living in Birmingham because my church and my husband's church were there. He was a Catholic and belonged to St. Stephen's when we were married. I belonged to Calvin United. In 1950, we could have bought a house in Birmingham. That was the time when the older residents were dying out and the young generation was moving out of the neighborhood. Mostly, they were buying property in Oregon. But my husband was transferred to Champion Sparkplug, which was closer to the West End. So we purchased a home there. Our roots and hearts are still in Birmingham. We always remained active in our home churches.



After the move, some of our friends criticized us and thought that we considered ourselves to be above living there. I never felt that way. In fact, after my husband passed away, I wanted to buy the Strick house on Genesee Street but somebody beat me to it. I wanted to sell my home and move back to Birmingham.

## **Home**

The minute people walk through my door, they see a paprika wreath, so they know I am Hungarian. On my door there is a little Hungarian sign and it has a dog on it under which reads: "Harapo's Kutya" (Beware the dog will bite.) When people ask me what the sign says, I tell them that it warns of a vicious dog that bites. Really my dog Kicsi (Hungarian for small) is very sweet and she welcomes everyone. Once inside, there is a Kalocsa pattern on linen material hanging on my wall. People who come over say, "Where did you get that beautiful wallpaper? It is so Hungarian." I tell them that it did come from Hungary but that it is not wallpaper. I made streamers of paprika for each side of a shelf that hangs in the middle of my wall which holds my Hungarian collection. After I did the wall, I also made curtains out of the same material. I also have an entire set of dishes (both Kalocsa and Herend patterns) from Hungary as well.

In my living room there are Herends on my mantel. One of my favorites is a cavalry soldier in his costume with his sword. He is a Huszar. I like him because he reminds me of how hard the Hungarian people struggled in all of the wars. It reminds me of how the Hungarians sacrificed their lives for freedom. We had cavalry that came to America from Hungary during the Revolutionary War.

## **Special Hungarian Clothing**

The first year I visited Hungary in 1974, I started buying blouses that were hand-embroidered, never thinking that I would one day teach an embroidery class. After I started teaching, every year I would buy embroidered costumes, blouses, and dresses. I now have eight dresses and many blouses. I also buy men's shirts. Every time I visit, I collect ideas for patterns so that the women in my class can make things for their families. They don't have to travel to Hungary to buy them.



## **Church and Organizations**

I have been in the choir since coming to Toledo in 1942. I love to sing. My voice isn't the greatest but like the rest of the choir, I enjoy it very much. I especially like the Hungarian services now that Rev. Imre Bertalan is back. We really appreciate him because he is educating the young people about traditions and customs in our church. I am also one of the church's "noodle ladies." We meet once a week to make noodles and sell them to raise money for Calvin United.

When my mother first came to Toledo, she was a member of a women's group called the "Lorantffy Zsuzsanna." Lorantffy was the Reformed Church's version of Mother Theresa. The group helped the needy. They would visit them and take pastries and food to them. They would also cook meals for those who were unable to cook for themselves. Now, the younger generations visit church members if they are in the hospital.

I am a member of the Hungarian Club and have been President four times. We celebrate many Hungarian customs, do Hungarian cooking, and the children celebrate March 15th, which is the Hungarian Independence Day. The people who fought in the 1956 Revolution started the club after coming to the United States. At one time it was just about to deteriorate until some from the younger generation, like myself began to restore it. At one point, there was a vote to sell the building and I said, "No Way! We can't have this happen to the large population of Hungarians in Toledo! We must have a Hungarian Club!"

## **Last Thoughts**

My roots were in Louisiana but since I have spent most of my life here in Toledo, Birmingham is my real home. I would like to see the customs continued. I am striving to keep up the traditions like embroidery.

I would like to plead with the readers to educate their children and grandchildren about their heritage. Tell them where you came from, where your roots are. It is so very important to this great country of ours that its children are in touch with their heritage.



# Elizabeth “Kardy” (Kardos) Boray

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*Interviewed by Randy Nissen  
with elaboration by her cousin Elizabeth Vargo Renz*

**M**y mother and father were both from Europe. My mother came with her parents when she was three, and my father came alone when he was sixteen. They had relatives here. My father's last name was Kardos. My mother worked, so I stayed with my grandmother. She had a daughter named Elizabeth and a stepdaughter also named Elizabeth. When they called, “Elizabeth,” we all answered, so my grandparents started calling me “Kardy” for “Kardos.”

My grandfather was Greek Catholic and my grandmother was Protestant. In those days that meant that the boys would be reared Catholic and the girls would be raised Protestant. One day the priest said, “I want to talk to Grandma.” He wanted the girls to be raised Catholic. She said to him, “They better not come here.” She was short and tough. They didn't come. They didn't dare!

I was born and raised here in Birmingham. We were church-oriented. When I was four, I went to Sunday School and sang in both English and Hungarian for the women's club. Later on, we had little clubs where we learned to sew and we also went to Hungarian school to learn to read and write. I did this at church because we had Hungarian ministers at the time. During summer school, we had nice plays. I was the singer. We performed “The Chocolate Soldier” and we even played for the Catholic people too. However, I didn't live in Birmingham the entire time. We moved different places but now I am back to the neighborhood where I was born. It was always nice in Birmingham. We got along with everybody and we had dance classes to learn the Hungarian dances.

We had shoemakers, beer joints, clothing stores, dry good shops, butcher shops, and grocery stores. On Whittemore Street alone there were nine bars and they all did very well. We also had Popcorn Joe on Front Street. Ironically, I used to work with his daughter who told me who her father was. Popcorn Joe was an old man who sold popcorn in front of a beer joint down by the railroad. He made a nice little living.

There were some gypsies here too. Not many lived here, they would mostly just pass through. They played their violins and they had bands. We had the gypsy camps here and they had a wonderful orchestra. Some of them worked here from Detroit. They were pleasant people. Uncle John owned a gypsies' nightclub.

## **The Vargo Coal Business**

We really don't know how our family got involved in the coal business. Grandpa used to have horses that would deliver coal. They had Mack trucks too, but he kept the horses. We don't know exactly when the coal company was started. It was named after his father and him—The Vargo Coal Company. We only really know about it from the time my mother married into the family.

The business was located at 2301 Consaul Street, down by the railroad tracks. The old homestead was a barn that they remodeled into a house. We never knew this when we were growing up. This was a time when people heated with coal. They took tons to the houses in the alley and they put it right in the coal shed. The newly built homes had furnaces, but we didn't yet. We had two coal stoves, one in the dining room and one in the front room and that is the way we heated.

I took care of the coal going out, took the orders, and weighed the coal in the trucks. It was a profitable business but then the Depression came and that hurt the coal business. Then, when people converted to gas, we lost most of the business. But, while it lasted, it was a nice living. We sold Ohio and Kentucky soft coal. The hard coal came from Virginia and Pennsylvania. We had the coal right in our yard and it came down on a conveyor into the trucks where it would be hauled away. A train would come right into the yards and deliver the coal.

May Coal was here on the East Side too. They were friends of ours, although their company does not exist anymore. He just went out of business. We still own our homes and are still here, though.

We extended credit when times were tough. Our customers were all good people and I don't think we were ever stuck with anything. They paid right away as soon as the trucker came back. Everything was cheap, about \$7.73 per ton for soft coal, but other types were more expensive. A lot of customers had coal bins which they filled up in the summer when the coal was slightly cheaper. This way, they didn't have to bother all winter. Years ago, when times were tough, some of the kids would run along the

coal train track and pick up the loose pieces of coal that would fall off the train. We never did that; it wasn't nice.

We should have started the first book earlier because Mr. Nagy, who was in the business during the same time period as my father, could have answered a lot of questions about this. But now he is gone. He went into the concrete business too. It was called the Columbia Block Company. We were busy here in Birmingham. Saloons were all over. Everybody had a good time. This was before the Depression.

## **The Depression**

People were out of work and used to get food with food stamps. We would go down to the corner store and use the stamps to get food. Years ago, everybody had a little plot where they could grow vegetables. We did a lot of canning years ago. We had cellars underneath the ground where we stored food and vegetables.

We went to Birmingham School from the beginning and then we went to Waite High School. I graduated and did not attend college. It was the Depression time and we were glad to have jobs of any kind. I went to Woolworth's where my aunt worked and was hired as a waitress. Other people had a hard time finding jobs. You did whatever you could do for work.

I got married in 1937. It will be 57 years that I have been married to one man. It has been a great life. Although, I still miss the times, years ago, when we would play on the street corners.

## **School**

In Birmingham, in the past, a teacher was a teacher and a child was a child. But now, the child dominates the teacher. If somebody got in trouble at school, they got in trouble at home too. Everybody respected their elders and teachers. We are from the old school, none of us had to receive whippings or anything like that.

## **Reflections on Modern Life**

We nearly faint when we see what is going on today. We don't understand it. I think our judicial system isn't strong enough. If someone commits a crime even once, something has to be done with him so he won't do it again. Now, the system gives him a little slap on the hand and lets him go. It is not right.



On the issue of single parenting, we think things are getting a bit out of control. We got married in order to have children and we think that it the right thing to do. The way things are going, kids today could wind up marrying relatives and not even realize it.

## **Weddings**

My wedding was lovely. We had it down in the cellar because it was during the Depression and we didn't invite very many people. My Uncle John was the violinist, and he had a band. I sang and we danced and had a good time. The weddings were wonderful. They served chicken paprikash and Hungarian soups too.

## **Religion**

Marriages between Protestants and Catholics were looked down on. I know this first hand because I am a Protestant and my husband is Catholic. Since he was her only son, my mother-in-law asked if we could say our marriage vows in front of a priest. I said, "He doesn't have to marry me." She said, "Oh no. That isn't what I meant." After that, we got along fine and she liked me. There was a stigma attached, though. In fact, some Catholics were taught not even to enter our church, not even for a funeral. I asked my girlfriend, "You mean after I die, you wouldn't come and see me? I will come back and haunt you!" Many Catholics came anyway. Once our marriage had taken place, it was no longer an issue. We were accepted.

## **Easter**

Holidays were very important and Easter was especially beautiful. The Catholics made up baskets and took them to the church to have them blessed. They didn't eat anything until it was blessed. The boys came on Monday to sprinkle us. Of course we had our hair marceled, so they didn't sprinkle us on our hair. A marcel wave was a hairstyle in which hair was rolled into continuous waves. It looked beautiful.

The sprinkling custom came from Hungary. Our kids use perfume but the real stuff is just water. A cute little verse would be read about a nice young girl who needed to be sprinkled to make her grow bigger and bigger. We had Easter Monday dances too.



## **Christmas**

On Christmas, the Catholic Church displayed a beautiful replica of the little stable that Jesus was born in, and then we had the shepherds come. They would go into the neighborhood houses and would say their poems and sing songs about Jesus being born. Then, at midnight, they all went to church and proceeded down the aisle and it was beautiful. The oregs were considered the devils and they were supposed to try to convince the audience not to believe in Christ or that Jesus was born. The other players dressed up in lovely white costumes. The shepherds were all in white with long cone-type hats with streamers. The oregs had big fuzzy masks. They would have an ax and chase the kids. Everyone was scared of them. They had cowbells and when we heard them we wanted to jump in a closet or under a bed.

These men would always grab the young girls and kiss them and rub their furry masks down their faces. Even though we knew who they were, we were still frightened. These were the Bethlehem plays. I think they have a movie about it. They don't go door to door anymore because the new neighbors would not understand the custom. They would probably throw snowballs at them. One time, someone was shot, so they stopped it. They do still perform the pageant at the midnight Mass.

## **Fourth of July**

We celebrated the Fourth of July, but did nothing spectacular. We went to the parade downtown but we didn't march. The most important holiday for the Hungarians was March 17, the anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution. The Revolution occurred in the 1800s, around 1847, I believe. It was celebrated by speaking in the church and talking about it. There was a national anthem that they would sing on that day. It is still celebrated today. We always sing at the Hungarian Club.

We have a lot of nice times there. In fact, there is a beautiful poem that we have translated. At the club, they have someone recite it in English and in Hungarian. I, of course, being born American, know it very well. But those who recite it who are from Hungary stand like soldiers and they don't move a muscle. They literally stand at attention. It is very moving to watch them. My son and I were at a picnic once and the orchestra stopped and everybody stopped and they announced, "We are going to sing the Hungarian Anthem." It is very impressive and it sent chills down my spine. It was wonderful. Those were the days.

## **Hungarian Heritage**

We are trying to get our children interested in Hungarian culture and language to keep it alive. We still have Hungarian church services here but that is dying out. Those are heart-felt words. English is fine, but Hungarian sends me. I was brought up bilingual. Hungarian seems more emotional to me when I hear it.

## **Hungarian Immigrants**

They all loved Hungary and their Hungarian heritage. Some of them wanted to go back, but some didn't. My grandmother from my mother's side never wanted to go back because the times were too hard there. She preferred to be here. They were eager to learn and become fluent in English.

They worked at the Malleable. This was a good place for them to work whether they knew English or not. But they strove to learn it. Some, like my grandmother, didn't learn English. She was afraid to say things so she always told us to speak for her. She understood some English, but she didn't want to learn. We even had some families who claimed that because they were in America now, they shouldn't speak Hungarian at all anymore. Some of them lost the Hungarian because when the parents went out to work and the kids went to school, they only spoke English. Now that they are older, some of them are wondering why they didn't learn Hungarian too.

## **Food**

If you haven't tried any Hungarian cooking, you haven't lived yet. We had paprikash with noodles and the dumplings with sour cream and gravy. We fried cabbage and mixed that up with cottage cheese. We had a variety of ways to make even the same items. Years ago, families were so poor this is what they were doing.

These recipes have been passed down to enough people to keep them going. We have cook books of all kinds. The food at the Budapest restaurant is very good. We have heard that it has changed a bit. But my nephew, Joel Vargo, who is the caterer, said that the Hungarian paprikash was delicious.

We also have our Birmingham Ethnic Festival. I think we are still going to continue our Hungarian Festival. It is a lot of work, but it is good. It makes money for the churches and everyone enjoys it.

## **Changes in Birmingham**

I have lived here all my life and I have witnessed a great population shift. The older residents are dying and new ones are moving in. Some of the new people are nice; some are not. We spend most of our time with friends from the church and not so much with neighbors anymore, like it used to be. I live next to someone right now whom I don't even know.

We like people. If people say "hello" to us, we always respond. Often, though, that is where it ends. We can't walk the streets like we did years ago. We never locked our doors; nobody bothered us. I am 80 years old, so I am about the last of the Mohicans.

## **Work Ethic**

We worked. Our people worked hard, but now people don't care. They are not like my sister who worked at CSI (Child Study Institute) for some thirty-five years. She was a clerk. Now she is retired and she still goes back to visit. Today, nobody cares whether they work or not. In the past, everybody worked and they liked their jobs. We respected the people who owned the businesses and we worked for them and we got paid. Now people say to themselves, "If I work, fine. If I don't, I really don't care." Or, a lot of them say, "I don't want to work for anybody. I want my own business." It is not that easy. It takes a lot to go into business for yourself.

## **Gold Earring Custom**

I definitely never had one. Legend had it that if you had your ears pierced you wouldn't get sick or get colds. I'm not sure why, but my mother never wanted us to have pierced ears, so we never did. Many other people did, though. My sister had hers done when she was older. I never did.

## **Black People in Birmingham**

The relationships were really nice. We got along in school. We never had this friction of bias. There was a great big apartment house here where about nine black people lived. We had a ball with them. McDaniels is now a doctor. They were smart kids. They enjoyed being friends with us. In fact, in my yard, when the kids were playing ball, my husband came out and said, "We've got a little Willie Mays." In the back yard, the kids were always playing together.

Black children would come over to our house to eat and that was fine. I remember too, in school, when we had a program for which we had to wear dark skirts and white blouses. I knew a black girl who didn't have a white blouse so we lent her one of mine and she returned it and it was fine. We never thought anything of it.

A few black men in the neighborhood were mailmen. They were very nice and we didn't have any problems. We liked the Baptist church here too. They were nice people. On Thanksgiving, we had special services together. Sometimes the Baptist church will invite the University of Toledo's Choral Society and we get to hear them sing. You can't beat that.

### **Bootleggers and Speakeasies**

They went to Detroit to get the "hooch." There were a couple of boys who got shot and drowned because they were bringing the stuff in and the water security got them while they were bringing it in by boat.

There were speakeasies in Birmingham. That is where they made the money. They got the hooch and whoever made the whiskey brought it in by gallon jugs and sold it. Once the "Feds" came in and busted a place. We lived next door to Uncle John's and the "Feds" came and were searching. They even searched my grandmother's place. They didn't find anything that time because we had been tipped off that they were coming. We had Canadian beer and things like that.

### **Socializing**

We went to the library which had different social hours. Growing up, it seemed, nobody got into trouble. Girls did not become pregnant at age 13. Hearing stories like this makes our hair stand on end. We had social community dances. There were separate clubs for men and women. We had big dances at Saint Stephen's or in rented halls. It was nice social dancing and no one tried to cause trouble.

We went over to each other's houses. On Sundays, we went visiting and talked and sang a few songs together. We had a good time. There were a lot of programs at church. They had Wednesday night services and youth fellowship. Now, most activities are at the school. Our life was church oriented. We didn't have to leave the neighborhood to do anything; we had enough to do right here in Birmingham.

### **Final Thoughts**



When you tell young people what should be done, they don't listen. Now, young people move out of the house or go move in with someone with out being married. This is a new trend. The young people want everything right away. They want color televisions, VCRs, and new cars. We waited for whatever we had—icebox, then a refrigerator. It was slow moving but we appreciated everything we were able to obtain. Some of them are not satisfied now. If we were poor, we were never aware of it because we had such a nice time and we had wonderful friends and food and shelter. We married and we got along and that is what is most important.

We like Birmingham and we did not move out. Our friends, our homes, and our church are here and there is nothing more important that.



# Anna (Potoczki) Fabos

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I attended St. Stephen's Elementary, Notre Dame Academy, and Davis Business College. I found education very exciting. At Davis, a student could move ahead at her own pace through typing, dictation, and English and then be sent out for job experience. Machines today such as computers, word processors and calculators are more technical and complicated. Back then, we had to know how to add in our heads rather than push buttons on a calculator.

## Holidays and Special Occasions

Courtship was very nice and brings back happy memories. I saw my future husband every Thursday evening and Sunday afternoon. These were the two official courting days in the Hungarian community.

Our wedding was a small, informal affair. We were married in St. Stephen's Church on a Tuesday because that was the day that the priest married people. The altar was beautifully decorated. We had three bridesmaids.

The wedding dinner was held at home and was attended by both families, the wedding party and the pastor. Before dinner, we walked home from church and found the door to my family's home locked. We knocked on the door and a voice from inside said, "What is in the middle of the Our Father?" We answered, "Let us in." This exchange was made in Hungarian.

The births and christenings of my four children were very special for me. I have been able to watch them grow into happy, fruitful adults. When they were baptized, the entire family was present. After the baptism, the "churching" of the mother took place. Only after the baptism and the churching could the mother go out in public. Somehow, the churching part of the tradition has been lost as the years have passed.

Funerals were always a sad occasion. The altars, coffin coverings and candlesticks were black. The priest and altar boys wore black, as well. There were no flowers on the altar. When the congregation was leaving the church, they would join with the

choir in singing a Hungarian hymn with the lyrics, "Death has snatched a rose from our wreath...." The words left a deep impression on the congregation.

If the deceased was a member of some society in the church, banners were carried representing the membership of the deceased in that society. Some of these societies included the Altar-Rosary Society, the St. Imre Society, the St. Istvan Society, the Anna Society, the Elizabeth Society and more.

There were many, many festivals. The church was always incorporated in these events. There were parish bazaars, dinners and dances; in the fall, the adults and children celebrated by wearing traditional Hungarian costumes at the Grape and Harvest Festival.

When I was a child, on Christmas Eve, my brother and I would put a cloth bag out on the porch for Jesus and his angel to fill. In those days, sugar and salt were sold in 5 and 10 pound bags. We would clean out those bags and use them for this purpose. My parents, my brother and I would sit at the kitchen table singing Christmas carols in Hungarian while we waited to have our bags filled. The door bell would ring and my brother and I would run to get the filled bags. The bags usually contained oranges, red apples, figs and assorted nuts. I received the 5 pound bag and my brother, happily, received the larger bag. When Joe, my brother, opened his bag, he did not find the treats I had in my bag; he found bricks and he cried. My mother consoled him and told him that he should be a good boy from now on and perhaps Jesus would change his mind. My father asked him to sit down and sing real loud so Jesus could hear the songs. The bell rang again. This time Joe received the goodies and was happy.

When raising our children, we stayed home on Christmas Eve. We sat around the Christmas tree and opened our gifts for one another. We opened our gifts early so that we could attend church as a family.

Birthdays were always a group affair with a cake, candles and gifts. Each of our children was given two big parties—one at age 7 and the other at age 16. At those two parties, they could invite all their friends. Otherwise, birthdays were always a family affair.

The Fourth of July was always celebrated with a picnic with family and friends. In the evening, we gathered around a cannon made by my husband and he shot it off. The bang could be heard for a long distance. We also shot the cannon on New



Year's Eve. My daughter, Rita Fabos Prebe, now has the cannon in her possession. Occasionally, she fires it on the holidays.

Labor Day was always celebrated with a picnic, usually a Hungarian bacon roast. When both of my children were in marching bands (at different schools), and had to march in parades, my husband went to one and I went to another so that neither child would be slighted. We were both so proud to watch them in a Labor Day parade.

On Memorial Day, everyone attended Mass at Calvary Cemetery. A local VFW and Legion post would be in attendance and a small parade incorporating various priests and the Bishop of Toledo would take place prior to the Mass. After Mass, we would drive to scenic areas around Toledo to celebrate the day.

We also celebrated Namedays. Nameday is the celebration of the feast of the saint for which one was named. A small gift was always given to the celebrant.

## **Lost Traditions**

Christmas time Betlehemes plays are no longer performed in homes. The members of the troupe entered the homes of the parishioners and performed a play. This tradition usually took place beginning Christmas Eve and for days after Christmas until they finished. Now it is only performed at the Midnight Mass at St. Stephen's.

In early times, the Hungarians did not send formal wedding invitations. Two young men carrying canes that were decorated with flowers and ribbons had a guest list. They went to the homes of those who were being invited and did so personally. The invitation was usually in the form of a poem. My brother, Julius Potoczki, was an inviter. I still have his decorated cane.

On Easter Monday, the young maidens were sprinkled with scented water by the young men in the community. A little poem was recited at the time. This was to signify that the person being sprinkled would again be a flower in bloom for another year. The young men were usually given an Easter egg or candy. Ah yes, memories. Once the flower is watered, it would not wither for another year. Those days seem long ago.

Many churches in Toledo have revived the tradition of the Easter food blessing. A basket filled with traditional Easter foods was taken to the church and the priest blessed the food with a traditional prayer.

## Home

No one would have thought that upstairs in this yellow brick, commercial building at the corner of Paine and Bakewell was our beautiful home. There were two staircases leading upstairs. One was from the store and one from the back of the building. It had 4 bedrooms, a bath, a large living room with a built-in fireplace and built-in wood settees on either side. The living room also had 2 chandeliers and built-in bookcases with leaded glass doors. The woodwork was all natural light oak. We had a beautifully polished wooden floor with a large rug for adornment.

On the wall opposite the fireplace in the living room stood our upright piano. I possess great memories of that piano. All of the children practiced diligently, or almost diligently, on that piano.

The dining room was also very large and had a built-in buffet and cabinets. Behind the buffet was a mirror. The cabinets and drawers were adorned with real glass knobs. Again, the floor was hardwood and a rug. There was a plate ledge that held our beautiful plates, many from the old country. We had a very large table and a china cabinet that held our fine liquor glasses for after dinner liquors and cognac.

There were French glass doors between the dining room and large hallway area. The hall had a large closet with a mirror built into the door.

The guest bedroom was off of the dining room. The other three bedrooms, as well as the bathroom, were off the main hallway.

The kitchen was large with built-in cupboards from floor to ceiling. It was white tile with a white tile floor. There was another hallway that led from the kitchen to the back of the house and the roof of the garages. That hallway had many shelves and we took advantage of storing our pots and pans, extra cookies, etc. on them.

The area on top of the garages outside was used for drying clothes on nice Mondays. Sometimes, in the summer, the girls would sunbathe on the rooftop.

We had flower boxes that my husband made by cutting hot water tanks in half lengthwise with wooden cradles to support them. We planted different kinds of flowers. We also had a cement tub that my husband made with glass pieces in it. We filled it with dirt and planted chives. These chives came up every year and we used them in cooking. My daughter, Rita, still has some of the original plant in her

garden. It still comes up each year. We used to grow some Hungarian parsley and a couple of times we trained some cucumbers to grow on the clothesline and the cukes hung down while growing.

Downstairs in the building was another kitchen which we used daily for the ease of convenience sake. There was another dining room off of that kitchen. We had the store itself and a back storeroom that we used for both personal and commercial use. We had a full basement where we did the laundry, canning and way back when—we had a coal bin and a coal burning furnace.

Special foods and favorites of my husband and children were my chicken and beef broths with homemade noodles. Chicken and veal paprikas with homemade dumplings or spatzle was another favorite. Stuffed veal roast, stuffed cabbage and stuffed peppers, savoy cabbage and potatoes, palacinta (crepes), strudel, noodles with fried cabbage, noodles with cottage cheese and fresh dillweed, noodles with ground nuts, with lekvar, rice cakes, and tortes were served for family and company often. The list of Hungarian foods served in our home is endless.

Like many other women, I learned how to cook from my mother, Elizabeth Potoczki. She also taught my daughters the fine art of making noodles, breads, strudels and tortes in addition to the basic Hungarian foods. My daughter, Rita, still has the knife that she used only to cut homemade noodles. This knife was never used for anything but that. My father, Joseph Potoczki, made the knife for my mother as a wedding gift. The handle is made out of horn. My dad also made cucumber slicers. I was given one for a wedding gift. It still slices cucumbers very fine. You can almost read through the slices.

My hobbies included embroidery, crocheting, knitting, needlework, needlepoint, and, whenever possible, traveling. My husband and I saved our change in a special bank that we couldn't snitch from and we went as far as the money took us. The children enjoyed the summer outings to friends' and family's homes in Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Florida, etc. Our youngest, Rita, went to the West Coast with us as the other children had jobs. While we were away for the one or two weeks, my mother and father watched the store and the children.

After the children were grown, I traveled to Europe several times. One trip especially stands out—the trip I took around the world with my daughter, Ann. She was working for the government in Viet Nam, and I met her in the Orient. We traveled together through exotic places like Saigon, Calcutta (where I met Mother

Theresa), the Taj Mahal, the Holy Land, Auschwitz and many other places. Hungary, of course, was one of my favorites. Each country holds so many memories, for example, seeing the Holy Father in Rome, or visiting Mount St. Michel in France. I could go on and on.

There are a few things that I recollect that were handed down from my ancestors. A rosary from my grandmother for my first communion, this was her personal rosary. Hungarian Herend pieces, down pillows and comforters. Embroidered pieces from not only my mother, but other members of the family—Hungarian dolls, pieces of homemade furniture and prayer books from Hungary.

Our first car was such a thrill. It was a 1936 blue custom DeSoto sedan with a shift. We paid \$980 for the car. It had running boards and we were all so proud of that car. It took us everywhere—picnics, on pilgrimages to Carey and Marywood, Ohio, to visit out-of-town friends and relatives. We would pile the four children in the back seat and as soon as we turned the corner, they were asleep. When awake, we played the usual car games with them and sang songs until we were hoarse.

A typical Sunday would include walking to 9:00 or 10:00 a.m. Mass at St. Stephen's. The walk back home would include a visit with my parents at their home and the occasional chats with friends who were out on their front porches at the time. We would have a lunch/dinner of, usually, chicken soup, chicken, potatoes, vegetable and a beverage. After dishes, we would go for a ride in the car. Before we had the car, we would go for walks and sometimes cross the Ash-Consaul Bridge to walk to Riverside Park or Collins Park or maybe we just visited friends and relatives.

Before TV, our entire family would gather in the living room in the evening and listen to the radio. One program we enjoyed was the Lux Theater. The girls and I did some embroidery and my husband and son read. My son also had a project or two that he would work on. I remember, very clearly, a quilt project that everyone had a hand in. Ann made Sunbonnet Sue and Sylvia embroidered different flowers on her squares. Rita was not born yet. Jim drew General MacArthur, cannons, artillery, etc. on his squares. He embroidered in red floss. The squares were then sewn together with strips of one color and made into a quilt. My husband showed us that he could embroider as well as the rest of us. He made a pillow case with small forget-me-nots on it. He also made two other fine pieces—a tablecloth and a child's baby carriage cover, which, at one time, was on exhibit at the Toledo Museum of Art.



## **Employment**

My husband and I came home from our honeymoon only to discover that he no longer had a job. The Depression had set in. My father worked as a carpenter and my mother kept house.

I did secretarial and office work for Mr. Harrison of Harrison Dust Guard Company. I was 14 when I was sent out of Davis Business College for an interview. I competed against 3 other girls and I was chosen. At the time, I had very long hair. Mr. Davis borrowed hair pins from the women at the college and pinned my hair in an “up-do”. This gave me the appearance of being older. He told me to say that I was 16 years old. I was hired and paid \$15 each week. I had to finish 2 months of college before I received a diploma. At that time, there were no copy machines. I had to use a large press. There was a big book with tissue-like sheets of paper. I would put the material on the tissue, wet a cloth and pull the press down and let it stay down for a day.

I fondly remember riding the streetcar for 5 cents one way. My office was upstairs on Superior Street across the street from the Interurban Station. Many times, I would walk home to Birmingham to save the car fare.

My major job was at the Fit Rite Dress Company upstairs in the building at Summit and Cherry. I did all of the office work except for the bookkeeping. Whenever I had some spare time, Mr. Fink, the owner of the company, would ask me to go to work in the shop. He said I did not have to do it, but I enjoyed it. He was a cutter and I enjoyed working for him using the materials, threads, etc. Then one day, I had to tell Mr. Fink that I was leaving his employ. He asked if it was for more money—he would give me \$50 per week. I said that it was not that, but my parents had bought a dry goods store and I was told that I would have to run it for them. I hated leaving Mr. Fink as I really loved that job. I was also a secretary and later the owner/manager of the Sylvia Ann Shop for 52 years. My specialty was outfitting girls for First Communion. I was inducted into the Birmingham Business Hall of Fame in 1982.

## **Social Life**

I belonged to many, many organizations including: Sodality of the Blessed Virgin, St. Emery's Society, St. Anna's Society, St. Elizabeth's Society and the Altar Rosary Society at St. Stephen's. I also belonged to St. Anthony's Guild, St. Stephen School

Mother's Club, Daughters of Isabella, Small Business Association, Council of Catholic Women, and the Hungarian Club of Toledo. I held office and other positions in several of these organizations.

Many groups of friends met at each others' homes. I fondly remember the Ladies Catholic Benevolent Association Christmas parties at different restaurants and with members of our families.

I belong to St. Stephen's and now to St. Joseph's in Sylvania, as well. I am a charter member of the Women's Club at St. Joseph's and I was the Tour Director also. I was also involved with Sr. Virgilia's group at the Lourdes College Senior Citizen's Club. I now live in Wellington House on Holland-Sylvania Road near Camp Miaconda.

### **Advice**

Love each other and care for each other as you would like to be cared for and loved. Recognize each other's strengths and dwell upon them. Help each other grow, both physically and mentally but do not neglect your spiritual life. Give thanks to God each day for each other. Count your blessings and give thanks for them. Last, but not least, smile at each other often. Happiness begets happiness and every life should be happy, healthy and harmonious.

# John Gocsik

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*Interviewed by Joyce Hutchison*

Imagine standing on the corner of Consaul and Caledonia. I will take you back in time to reconstruct the neighborhood. Over to the left was an apartment house. Right next door was Trotter Lumber. There was also a movie theater called the Tivoli and across from what was known as The Rumpus Room, was a part of the lumber yard where people, years ago, would go to obtain water from a deep well. (Everyone would bring their buckets and gallon jugs. It was ice cold.) Unfortunately, the lumberyard burned down long ago.

Also here is the famous Tony Packo's, now located on the corner of Consaul and Front Street. Tony Packo used to work for his brother, John Packo, until he moved to another location on the corner of Genesee and Consaul Street. That is where the original restaurant originated, I believe. I can remember when his hot dogs were a nickel a piece. Then the Packos raised the price to a dime and on Mondays, they were two for fifteen cents.

Across the street was the Kinsey Mortuary. They have been there for as long as I can remember. In Hungarian, Kinsey means "snake." I remember, once, when I was with my wife, (who was then my girlfriend) I asked him "How is business, Mr. Kinsey?" And he said, "dead." It was a joke. He used to do his own embalming. He used to take the bodies in his garage in the back of his place and embalm them and drain out their blood. It drained out into the sewer. He told me that one time, someone was supposed to be dead and they laid him on the table. When Mr. Kinsey came back, the guy was sitting in a chair!

Between St. Stephen's School and Mike Juhasz's place is Magyar Street. That street was named after my grandparents. Magyar means "Hungarian." The Birmingham Branch Library has been located in the same spot for years.

Szabo's Grocery Store used to be across the street. The Szabos were farmers and did all their own butchering. Directly across from the store was Humphrey's Drug Store but it was also used for the AA Welfare. They used to give people bread, potatoes, milk, and mash. One day, I took my little red wagon and went there to get some staples. (In those days, we weren't embarrassed when our parents told us to do



something. We just obeyed and never questioned them.) We needed these things, but my father was too proud to accept them. The people in this neighborhood were proud. They didn't want anything for free.

Inside the VFW Hall, there were bowling alleys in the lower floor and apartments in the upper ones. It also served as a bootleg place. High class gangsters used to come here and I used to go there with my father. The people that used to run it were bootleggers. One time, the owner of the bar was running whiskey from Canada by means of a boat and the cops were chasing them. The police shot at them and hit the boat's fishing nets and the boat sank. They lost the whiskey and drowned.

My uncle ran a Kroger store over on Genesee Street. I was only fourteen when I worked there for twenty cents per hour. I worked a twelve hour day, from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., and we were not paid "time and a half" back then. On Saturdays, I had to be there at 7:00 a.m. to set everything up in the window and then I had to stay until almost 12:30 p.m. cleaning everything up and getting ready for Monday.

By then, my girlfriend (who is now my wife) would walk past the store on her way to the weekly dance and I would have to tell her that I would see her later, after I was done at the store. After work, I would run like hell to the dance which was over at 1:00 a.m. Still, it was a lot of fun

I remember the beer joint on Consaul Street where they sold liquor. On that same, short block there were seven beer joints. Across the street from the Calvin United Church was another beer joint and a place which we coined, "the house of sin." It was a beer joint, but you had to be eighteen to get in. They always let me in even though I was only fifteen or sixteen, though. People would always ask me how I managed to get in.

Other locales included: Trotter Lumber, The Rumpus Room, Kiss Hardware, Weizer's Furniture Store, Reids (a variety store), The Palm Theater (which is now the Hungarian Club), and the police station, Birmingham School, and on every block it seemed there was a grocery store.

When we did not have any money and we went food shopping, the grocer allowed us to use store credit. He "marked it up." When my father went back to work, the grocer was the first person that he repaid. A lot of grocers got cheated. But none of the grocery stores went out of business until the giant Kroger Stores and huge supermarkets began coming in. Tackas Grocery Store is still in the neighborhood.

They specialize in Hungarian food and they make their own lunch meat. They also make all the Hungarian sausage. He came from Europe and started the business and now the son has taken over the store.

## **Prohibition**

There used to be about twelve bootleg places down on Consaul Street. My father-in-law used to cook whiskey with his brother-in-law. He would have the corn mashed out on the farm. One man, who lived on Burr Street, had a closet that we could get behind which had a door that led to an underground tunnel. He used to put whiskey in there. In the back yard, there was an exhaust, but no one could ever find it. I think the cops were ignorant about things like that back then.

## **Automobiles**

My father used to fix cars. I can recall that I used to ride with him to Niles Beach, which is about five or six miles from Birmingham up the lake. My father had a Model A. I used to call it "whiskey in a beer container." The top came down like a convertible. I always rode with him so the cops would never stop him. At that time, we used to call the police "the dry dicks." My father used to cut down the heads of the motor to make the car go faster like race cars. He used to be able to go 55 miles an hour and the cops could never catch him.

## **Family**

My mother's maiden name is Magyar. Someone once told us there was a family by that name in Detroit, but we never found them. My mother, Elizabeth Magyar, died here about two years ago and my father, Steve Gocsik, died in 1965. My aunts, too, are all dead.

My parents had three boys and a girl. I am the oldest child and I was born on May 13, 1923. When I was born, my mother said that it cost \$10.00. The midwife lived on Genesee Street. She used to have a big sign with a stork on it. The first child to be born in a hospital was my sister.

Mom was 5'4 inches tall and she always told my sister, "I am glad that all you kids are taller than your father and I." My grandfather was 6'4 however. He spent most of his time in the Hungarian Army, in the Hussars. Then he came here and was a molder at the National Mill.



I have a younger brother, Steve, Junior, who was born in 1936 and a sister, Margaret, who was born in 1931. I also have a brother, Ernest, who is now 65 years old.

My mother and father were both born in Hungary. My father was sixteen when he came here with his family. My father always told us that he was born on Christmas Eve, but we did not believe him until a relation of ours came from Europe with his birth certificate and verified his story.

## **Marriage**

My wife and I were married for twelve years before we had our son. We went to doctors who told her to quit her job because it was too much stress. She quit her job and then twelve years later, she became pregnant. Since she was admitted into the hospital on May 4th, the doctors suggested that we must have tried to have our child on our anniversary. But he was actually born on May 6th. We got married in 1946 and lived with her parents, Helen and Henry Sabo, until 1948. They never took a dime from us. We never argued. They always took my side regardless of the situation.

My wife went to grade school and high school. She also worked as a pay-roll clerk at Toledo Scale for the executive office. After our son was born in 1958, my wife thought of going back to work. Before she decided, she asked my son. He said, "No, Mom. Stay home." So, she stayed home with him. She took him to school and spent a lot of time with him. He never gave us trouble. He lives with us now. He is pretty smart. He pays us room and board. We give him anything that he wants. He is a good kid. He never lived away from home and he helps everybody.

## **School**

I enjoyed Birmingham School. I had a lot of friends and one of my teachers, Mrs. McLeery, had also taught my mother. I used to go to school with my cousins. I walked seven blocks to school from Burger Street, all the way to Paine Avenue. If we lived a mile or more away from school we were allowed to bring our lunches with us and stay in the building at lunch time. We weren't allowed; we had to go home. Unless the temperature was at zero, we had to walk home for lunch. We didn't mind; it was a lot of fun.

There were about forty-five kids in my class. Our desks were two seated, so we sat in pairs. If any of the boys misbehaved, they would have to go sit with a girl which was a “no no” among the guys.

I remember I received a paddling from our school principal because I pulled some girl’s hair. Mrs. Graether, the principal, gave me a couple of whacks. I went home and told my mother. My mother then gave me the worst licking I ever had in my life. After that, I learned that when I did something wrong at school and was given a beating, I shouldn’t go home and tell my mom!

Today, the kids don’t listen. These days, the kids go to school wearing shorts. It is terrible. I think too much has been given to these kids. When I went to school, we played ball and had to buy our own equipment. Now, I see kids begging their parents for money in front of stores.

When my son went to kindergarten and we went for teachers’ day, his teacher said, “You know your son is very smart. He wants to know what communism is.” After they discussed it in class, my son then proceeded to explain it to me. I never knew what a sonic boom was either. He was only in second grade and he showed me how they occur. He explained it to me while drawing a diagram on a blackboard. He received all A’s all through grade school, junior and senior high school. He earned all A’s except one. Mrs. Carrot gave him a D in penmanship. I spoke to the principal about it. The principal explained to me that his penmanship wasn’t very good. I said, “O.K., then why does he have all A’s in all the other subjects you are teaching?” We forced her to change the grade. I think he got a C or something.

When he graduated, he joined the National Honors Society, but he wasn’t interested in clubs. Out of the 432 kids who graduated that year, he was in the top ten. He was given a trophy and a scholarship. He came home and put the trophy on the mantel over the fireplace. The next day, my wife said, “When we take this to the jeweler, I will have them put ‘junior’ at the end of it because I want it to be clear which Gocsik won this award.” We were very proud.

I think another problem is that they are pushing teachers out of college too fast. These young teachers don’t take enough interest. They say, “Well, I can’t teach unless there are only 26 kids per class.” I know all through my schooling, there were always more than 35 children to a class. Everybody I knew did well, never landed in jail, purchased homes, and are doing well. Those teachers must have taught us values

and respect. Even when the teachers did not get paid, they still came to Birmingham School.

There were some black children at my school. There was a black man who lived two doors down from me when I lived on Burger Street. We used to go over to his house and he would come over to our house and we would play together.

## **Military**

When I was about to enter the service, I told my parents that I didn't want to go. My father cussed me up and down. He informed me that I had to go because America had taken in our family and had been good to us. He felt that I should go to represent our family's respect and gratitude for the United States.

So I went. In a way, I was glad because in the military, we could eat as much as we wanted. I wound up bunking with a friend of mine whom I had grown up with. We went through the whole war together. I was given two purple hearts because I got wounded twice. I had five battle stars. We were gone for a total of 38 months. I still see that friend today.

I thought the armed service was really something. I would never do it again. But when I joined, I was only eighteen years old. I just did not care about what was going on. I took all kinds of chances. We built a bridge across the Rhine River with Patton's Third Army. We were the combat engineers. Before the troops could move inland, they would call us. We would move from front to front which is why we were called the "bastard outfit." One thing we liked about being the "bastard outfit" was that no matter where we went, we always got to line up first for rations.

We also built a foot bridge across the Ruhr River. My wife and my mother had a copy of the *Stars and Stripes* and inside the edition was a photo of a wounded soldier strewn across the bridge who looked exactly like me. In fact, they thought it was me. Luckily, it was not me although I did get wounded there and was sent to the hospital. They sent a purple heart home. The news was published in the local paper. Everybody prayed at church. To me, all the fuss didn't mean anything, but I still have a copy of that *Stars and Stripes*. The picture really did look exactly like me.

The next incident I had was when I got hit with a grenade which shattered my leg. When they took me to the hospital, I felt like I had enough and I thought to myself,

"I am going home." So, I snuck out. I asked the ambulance driver if he would take me back to my outfit. Shortly after I returned,

the company commander called me into his office and told me that I had been listed as AWOL (absent without leave). I said, "But what do you mean? I am right here!" Three months later, I was shot again.

This time, I was hit in the face and was sent back to the hospital. I was there for just about a week while they patched me up. When I returned to the fighting, I was in the Battle of the Bulge. All of this time, I was with my closest buddy.

There were so many things that went on during the war. I tend to only remember the good times. I traveled to places like Paris, Brussels, the Notre Dame Cathedral, and the Eiffel Tower. I spent about twenty-eight days in Paris, but that was only because our truck broke down and we couldn't return to our outfit. I really enjoyed Brussels; it was a great time.

We stayed in Ireland for seven months. When we were walking down the street, the girls would come over and grab us by our arms. They would ask, "How about walking with me?" They were afraid of the black soldiers. Once, when I was in the barracks, a guy told me he was talking to this girl who asked him what religion he was. When he told her he was "a Catholic boy," she took off running down the street.

I knew a lot about history and geography and I started thinking, "Ireland is a country where the Protestants and the Catholics fight." So, the first thing I would say to a girl I met was "By the way, are you a Protestant?" and if she said "yes," I would say, "So am I." Then we would get along fine. I use the same technique with the Catholic girls too.

On Sundays, Ireland closed down in the evenings. Nothing was open. The only thing we had to do was to walk around and we would walk all day. Also on Sunday mornings I would go to Mass with a Catholic girl I was seeing and her family. At church, the girl would walk in front, followed by her mother and father and then her two brothers. At 10:30, I would then attend the Methodist church with another girl I was seeing at the same time who was Protestant. Eventually, I got caught because the girls knew each other and they figured out what was going on. It was fun while it lasted.



Walking down the streets in Ireland reminded me of streets in the American South. Down South, when we would be walking on the sidewalks, the black people would get off the street. In Ireland, Catholics would walk on one side of the street and Protestants on the other. In Northern Ireland, the Catholics would get off the sidewalk because Protestants were in the majority. The younger people were more friendly, however. The Protestants and the Catholics are still fighting in Ireland, but I don't know what they are fighting over. Everybody thinks that if you are Irish, you are Catholic too, but that isn't the case.

I was also in Holland, Luxembourg, and Germany. When we went through the towns in France and in Belgium, they would have German flags out. We would take them down and then all the American flags would come out. They would be cleaning up with their little straw brooms after we would walk through a town. I was given a pair of wooden shoes that were made as souvenirs.

## **Work**

I was ten years old when I got my first job picking tomatoes. My mother, father, my younger brother Ernie, and I went picking for five dollars a day. The farmers would bring us back at the end of the day. We used to pick onions, cherries, raspberries, and strawberries. In those days, that was all day work. I was a hard working Hungarian.

When I was sixteen, I started working at Swartzbaugh Manufacturing. I also worked at the railroad for awhile. I worked at the Toledo Shipyard and at the manufacturing plant until I entered the service. I was making thirty-six cents per hour. When I came home, after the war, they called me in the office and said, "Well, you were in the service and fought for our country, so we are going to start you off at one dollar per hour." I thought to myself, "What the hell am I going to do with one dollar an hour?" So, in 1948, I bought a house.

I really worked two jobs. One at and one at Willys-Overland, which is now the Jeep Plant. My wife was working too. She was making \$225 a month and I was making only \$160. With my father-in-law's help, we bought the house and I borrowed \$3000 from First Federal on Erie Street. My payments were \$15 principle and \$15 interest. I didn't know how we were going to do that. After we had lived there for ten years, my wife figured out that we were paying too much interest, so we doubled our payments. I remember the bank teller asking us who told us to do that. I told him,



“That’s the way my wife says it works.” We got the house paid off and we lived there, at 2353 Bakewell until 1960.

We then moved to Oregon, Ohio and I paid off that house within five years. Eventually, my father-in-law bought a farm and that is where we live now. I also own a home on Eastmoreland Drive.

I started working at Libbey Owens in 1950 as a foreman. I did that for twenty-eight years. I never wanted to be put on salary because I made more money as an hourly employee. My father-in-law got me the job because he knew the plant manager.

I had many good times at work. The bad times, I seem to forget. I used to ride a bus to work. I caught it at Front Street and after I got off I would take a street car to Bancroft and Monroe where I would then walk four blocks to get to work. Later, a co-worker would give me rides. I would give him fifty cents a week for gasoline. Gasoline was cheap back then.

## **Health**

I have only been sick once. When I was sixty-four, I had a gall-bladder attack. When it happened, I walked to the hospital. The nurse asked me what was wrong and I told her I thought I was dying. They admitted me and the next day the doctor came to my room to ask me if I had family who would be able to sign the consent forms so that he could operate. I told him that I didn’t want anybody to sign the papers, because if I died then whoever signed them would feel guilty. So, I signed the papers myself and everything turned out fine. Since then, I have never been sick.

## **Church**

On Sundays, I used to take my family to St. Michael’s. When we grew up, everyone went to church. My mother used to live on Burger Street (where I grew up) and she would walk to church. When I was a young married man, she used to holler at me and ask me why I never came to see her. I always told her that I was busy. She told me that she saw my truck at the VFW Hall though. Charlie, a friend of mine, reminded me that I only had one mother and while she was alive, I should be spending all the time that I could with her. So, I took his advice and I visited her every day until she died.

I respected my mother and if I missed going to see her or missed going to church, she would yell. I told her, "Only sinners go to church and dummies go to school." She told me that I had better go to both of them! But, I gave up church a long time ago. When I got married, I was a Catholic and my wife was a Protestant. In those days that was considered taboo.

Monsignor Eordogh, the senior priest at St. Stephen's, was a mean one! When he walked down the street, everyone respected him. Even people who were not Catholic respected him. He was the king of the neighborhood.

My mother and grandmother along with some of the other older women used to run the church with an iron fists. Without telling me, my wife started to take instructions to become a Catholic and the priest told me that he didn't think she was going to make a good Catholic. Since I didn't know she was taking instructions, I had to ask my mother-in-law to explain it to me. My mother knew about this too and when I told them both that the priest said she wouldn't make a good Catholic, they both went to see him and yelled at him. I think it was this situation that caused the rift between me and the church.

Every now and then, I will still go to church. When I was young, I was forced to go and now I only go when I want to. When I was a boy, I practically lived in the church. I helped the priest all the time because I was an altar boy. School began at 8:30, but I never got there until 9:30. I was excused. I was pretty religious at that time. Sometimes I would go to church three times on Sundays. I would go to 6:00 a.m. Mass at St. Stephen's in the morning, then I would go home and go to sleep for a little while. Then my mother would wake me up for church at 8:00 a.m. at St. Michael's. After that, we would go to the bowling alley. Mr. Maraoda, the old man who owned the bowling alley, was religious, but he could cuss like hell. He went to church at 10:00 and he made us all go or he would not let us into the bowling alley for three days. My buddy would go to Litany at 2:00 and I would stand and wait for him but the nuns would say, "Get in church." So, sometimes, I would go to church four times a day. I don't regret it today either. I don't think I would have wanted things to be any different.

My wife did not join the Catholic Church. She remained Protestant. My father-in-law and mother-in-law did not care if I converted or not. But for many years, my mother was mad that I married a Protestant. Then, after awhile everybody got over it. Except my mother. I thought, "Why would she want me to marry someone I

didn't like?" After four or five years everything was accepted and that is the way it went.

## **Religious Traditions**

My wife did not take my son to church and when he was born, we did not baptize him. My mother kept asking, "What if he dies? He is going to die in sin!" I responded, "He is just a baby. He has no sins." She told me he would have my sins. After I informed her that I had no sins, she told me not to lie.

Later, we did decide to have him baptized. Sue and Ernie Belegrin were the godparents. He was baptized in a gown made by my godmother in Hungary. Other family members baptized in that gown include: myself, my mother, her two sisters, my two brothers, one brother's daughter, my sister, and her two children. We still have it. It has to be more than ninety years old. It is made of real silk, and is embroidered with crochet.

The priest said that he would baptize my son on a Sunday, at 2:30 p.m., after they had the Mass. I told him that time was not convenient because my godparents worked on Sundays. We wanted the baptism to be held on a Saturday. The priest said, "Well, we can't do that." I said, "Well, yes you can do that." I let him know that I better have my way. I told him that I wanted the baptism to be held at 6:00 p.m. I also told him that I wanted the church bells to ring during the baptism. The priest told me that it would be an extra \$25.00 for the bells. I thought that since we were members of the church, he should do that for free. I thought it was his responsibility to marry and bury people free of charge. I wouldn't let the godfather give him the \$25.00, but he did anyway. I was really angry about the whole situation. After that, I was down on religion.

The neighborhood was really religious. We used to have the Christmas show, Betlehemes. We dressed up and would go around to the churches and to the houses and chase the girls. I was a devil.

When I went into the service, I met Jews, Protestants, atheists, and everything else. We were all different. Some of my best friends were atheists. One of my best friends was a Jewish guy. We were exposed to all religions. That experience changed my perspective.



## **Funerals**

The last place my grandfather lived was at 12 Magyar Street. He used to work at the Maumee Mill. During calling hours, he was laid out in the front room of the house for three days. Someone stayed with the casket twenty-four hours a day for three days. People from the church came and sat. At funerals, people used to drink and get drunk. At other funerals, my grandfather used to go down to the basement to bring up the wine because we made a lot of wine.

At the funeral, the pallbearers carried grandfather on their shoulders from Magyar Street to the church. After mass, they put him in a hearse. It drove down Bogar, Bakewell, and Consaul. A band played. The women displayed banners of various church organizations. They would march all the way up to the Ash-Consaul Bridge. Then, they would stop.

After the funeral, everyone would gather at the house where they would eat and drink whiskey. It was like a party. Today, funerals and calling hours are much different. If somebody dies now, the family hires a caterer, but back in those days, we used to cook the food ourselves. When it was a nice day, we used to lay the caskets outside the church. Now, there is only one day devoted for burials and funerals.

## **The Christmas Pageant**

At Christmas time, people dressed like shepherds would go around to the different houses in the neighborhood. When I first started, I was a shepherd. Later, I played a devil. There were eight of us who wore hats painted red, white, and green. We had ribbons hanging on our heads too. They had red, white, and green stripes, which are the Hungarian national colors. On Christmas Eve, the first place we would stop was the Catholic Church and then the Hungarian Reformed Church. There was always good wine for us when we would do this. I started drinking when I was sixteen.

We would put on the show at every beer joint and butcher shop in the neighborhood. When I was a devil, I wore red baseball pants, boots, and a sheepskin coat with the lining turned inside out. On my head, I wore a mask that had duck feathers sticking up. We would chase the girls. They knew who we were. There were two of us. I carried a bag, a whip, and an aluminum ax which was made by my uncle at the Unicast. The kids used to scream; it was a lot of fun.

When we would go to the grocery stores, I would walk in and go behind the counters and steal big salamis. Then I would steal hams. This was tradition. The grocers expected this and would have the meat waiting for us. We kept the meat, and after the holidays, we would use it at the big party we would throw for the players.

We used to go after people on the street, even my father. I would go up to him and say, "Well, old man, what are you going to give the devil?" He would give me a cigar or money to buy drinks. We would also catch the girls and kiss them. The girls' mothers and fathers would help us find them.

We put on a show at Midnight Mass and after that, we would all pile in one car and go to the Ritz, which was a large night club with a dance floor and bands. I would crack the whip and we would put on a show there too. Then we would pass the hat around to all the people at the club. We would collect \$30.00, which at the time was a lot of money. Nobody got hurt; it was all in fun. Then, on Christmas Day, we would visit all the houses of parishioners. The Protestant people used to also ask us to come in. We used to collect about \$900 annually for the small troop. The older troops would only collect about \$700. For some reason, the smallest troop always got the most money, but it was all donated to the church. We really enjoyed ourselves. It was fantastic to be involved in.

## **Family Life**

Family times were always enjoyable. Like many families, we were poor, but we loved to do everything together. We went to church and on picnics together; we did all sorts of things together. Also, everyone in the neighborhood was friends. We used to talk over the fences to all our neighbors. Everyone had a skeleton key which would open all of our homes. We used to leave doors open when we left the house and no one ever bothered our things.

Besides the Depression, I never really had any hard times. I enjoyed life when I was a child. It was good. There were times, though, when life seemed stern and strict, like when dealing with my mother. We obeyed and respected our mother until the day she died. Sometimes, she would cuss me up and down. (Yet other times, she would treat me like God because I was her oldest son.)

We had fun as kids. We didn't have much to play with, but we made do. We made hockey sticks out of branches we cut from trees. We used to go down to the garbage



dumps and pull out cans and tie them on our shoes. Then, we would march down the street, the cans making loud noises as we walked.

There used to be a great many kids who played on Whittemore Street, between Valentine and Caledonia Street. That was a fantastic place to skate. Hundreds of kids would skate on Burger Street. We went roller skating there because it had a hill and we used to fly down it.

## **Harvest Dance**

They hung clotheslines in the basement of the church. They would tie apples, bananas, and all kinds of fruit to the ceiling rafters for decoration. It was like a grape arbor. After they had a parade through the neighborhood, we had a dance at the church where people would try to steal the grapes. Some young people would be appointed to try to catch the thief. Once the thief was caught, he was taken to the judge who would estimate how much the grapes would cost. He would charge then charge him. All the money would be donated to the church.

## **Special Honors**

I was inducted in 1986 to the Birmingham Hall of Fame for my softball activities. I really did not want to be inducted, but my buddy talked me into it. They presented me with a plaque with my name engraved on it. I played softball at the VFW Post 4906, Kay Jewelers, and Swartzbaugh Manufacturing. I also played football for the Birmingham Merchants. I also won first place in the Knights of Columbus Bowling Tournament in 1941.

## **Marriage**

Once, while I was playing football, three girls walked across the street and I looked closely at one of them and declared to my buddies, "I am going to marry that girl someday." Then, I had one of her girlfriends fix me up with her for the following Sunday. I told her I would meet her at the Tivoli Theater. I was late and the place was crowded. People were standing on the sides of the rows, but she had saved a seat for me. So, we got together.

We started dating when I was eighteen and she was sixteen. We were married by the time I was twenty-two. We didn't have a wedding. We eloped in front of the Justice of the Peace. I will say one thing, I have a good wife. When I was in the service for those thirty-eight months, she wrote me a letter everyday. I only wrote twenty letters in that time. The guys used to get mad at me. At mail call, I would receive letters and the other guys would ask, "How do you get all those letters when you don't write?" At one point, the company commander called me in and ordered me to write home.

My mother, too, always wrote me and she would ask me to write back and tell her what was going on. In her letters she would always ask if I was dead because she never heard from me. I did not have time to write. Besides, I was no writer.

## **Citizenship**

My father became a citizen in 1936. My mother obtained her citizenship in December of 1943. She studied for the citizenship test for quite awhile. My sister helped her study. When my mother went before the judge, she was so nervous that she couldn't speak. The judge asked, "Do you have anyone in the service?" She replied, "I have two sons in the service." So he said, "O.K. You're a citizen." That is the way she obtained her citizenship papers. She was forty-two years old when she became a United States citizen.

## **Unicast**

Everyone worked at the Unicast. Inside, graphite got in the air. Even after people would wash their work clothes, the graphite would still be there because it was so fine. At the Unicast, there was so much noise that if you were talking to someone who was not from the neighborhood they would ask, "What is that noise?" It took residents a few minutes to figure it out because we were so used to the noise. The furnace made a loud, hissing sound that could be heard throughout the neighborhood. Then, when the pig iron fell into the water to cool off, the sky would light up red.

One guy started an environmental campaign against the Unicast. He rallied people together to bitch about the dirt and noise produced by the Unicast. Finally, the plant folded up and moved out. People lost their jobs.

When my wife worked at Toledo Scale, her co-workers thought she was rich because of all the graphite that hung in her hair and sparkled from the Unicast. When she sat

under fluorescent lights, her hair would be sparkled. She did not know this because she never paid attention. After she found out, she had to wear a hood into the Unicast. Both the Unicast and the Gulf Refinery folded.

## **Recreation**

We used to play in the old pit, which was a dump. We used to go swimming in the creek at Hecklinger's Pond in the summertime. When it would freeze over, we would skate down there. We went swimming in the Maumee River in January by the Edison Plant on Front Street (which is closed now). When they generated electricity, all that hot water would flow into the river and so we swam in the hot water. Believe it or not, we would swim naked. The water was twenty feet deep. And, we would dive off boats and off of the Ash-Consaul Bridge which was only sixty feet above the river.

We had picnics. The different church organizations cooperated to organize huge, group picnics. Local businesses would contribute too. Katona's Trucking would clean out a truck and use it to transport people over to Oak Shade Grove, where we had the picnics. At these picnics, the adults would dance and drink and all of the children would run around and play in the woods. Everyone had a wonderful time. We had a portable, wooden dance floor which we brought along.

In the wintertime, churches had banquets. All the churches worked together despite their differences. They were always memorable. Also, we used to go out to Pearson Park when we were kids. At the time, we used to call it Mile Long Woods. To get there, we would ride our bikes three or four miles. We would take our lunches out there. These informal occasions were the most significant to us. National holidays such as the Fourth of July and Memorial Day were nothing special to us. Of course there would be parades for these events and we would go downtown to see them. But that was the extent of our involvement. The only time our family had a special celebration was on first holy communion days when we would have a special meal. It was like a little party. We had parties like this when my son and nephews were baptized. Of course, too, we would celebrate weddings but holidays were just like any other days.

However, we did have mini-traditions to celebrate annual holidays. On Columbus Day, for instance, we always made a trip to Navarre Park. We would walk on the railroad tracks to a thorn-apple field. We used to pick all the thorn-apples we could carry and filled up our shirts with them. They were big, buttery apples. Another

example of one of our informal celebrations took place the Friday after Thanksgiving. On that day, we would all go to Tiedtke's so my mother could buy us our winter clothes. We used to enjoy the good music at the store and could buy banana splits for 15 cents or a hot dog and a root beer for a dime. Tiedtke's was a large store with ninety-nine departments. Everything you needed could be purchased under one roof. On that Friday, there would be hundreds of people shopping there.

My wife liked to do her Christmas shopping on Christmas Eve because in those days it always seemed like it snowed on Christmas Eve. It was festive and the salespeople were so friendly. There were so many stores downtown; it was fantastic!

## **Sundays and Meals**

On typical Sundays, our family went to church at 8:00. My mother would go at 10:00, but beforehand, she put the soup on the stove to cook and simmer. Then, my father would build a fire in the backyard. We would go to church and when we came home, we had Hungarian Turkey (which was bacon, rye or Vienna bread, sliced onions, tomatoes, and green peppers). At 12:00, we would have a soup dinner. When we finished eating at 1:00, we would go to the Tivoli Theater. After the show, we would walk around and hang out in the bowling alley and then for supper my mother would serve breaded chicken and pigs in a blanket.

On Mondays, we always had liver. Tuesdays were spaghetti nights; on Wednesday we had steak, when we could afford it. Thursday nights were potato nights and Fridays were reserved for soup.

To enhance the soup, my mother would take cottage cheese, egg white, and sugar and mix them together then put it in the finished dough. She would then boil it in water and bake it. We ate this with tomato soup. We ate no meat on Fridays whatsoever. Saturday was a day of leisure; we ate whatever was in the icebox. (The iceman used to come around and put 25 pounds of ice in the box which we kept in one compartment with a pan at the bottom to catch the water.) Soup was made out of a chuck roast. My mother used to make cooked dough balls. The noodles were all hand made; everything was made by hand.

## **The Depression**

We used to steal coal from the railroad on Burger Street. We used to call it "the drag." When the train would travel up the hill, we would grease the track to cause



the train to slip which would give us time to unload some coal. I remember, one Saturday it was muddy and all the people in the neighborhood, even the old ladies with their aprons on came out to carry the coal. People used wheel barrels and wagons. Hundreds of people would come out, even the kids. They would throw the coal off the top. We would go down to Paine Avenue, catch the train, and then would pile all of the coal up at one end. As the train began to go uphill, we would kick it off onto the side of the railroad track where people could come and pick that up.

So many bizarre things happened because of the people stealing coal. One time, some of the people began shooting at the police. Another time, a guy unhooked the coal car so the rest of the train went, but the coal was left behind. Everybody had a shed in the back of their houses to store the coal and they used to sell it for \$2.00 a ton.

One guy who lived at the end of Burger Street had a special yell. It was a signal. When we heard it, all the guys would come out and wait for the train. Another guy had a horse and wagon. He used to load the coal and sell it. He would give us fifty cents if we helped him load it.

The National Mill used to park its box cars on the side of the tracks and we used to steal wheat. They sealed the car doors so we used to drill holes under the doors and the wheat would pour out. We filled up our bags with it and we ground the wheat to make flour. The National Mill had all the wheat it wanted. It wasn't like we stole cars, robbed or beat people up, nothing like that. The coal companies had huge surpluses of coal too. We took the coal and wheat to survive. Since this took place during the Depression, the priests knew what we were doing, but they never said anything about it. Churches at that time were poor too.

## **Vacations**

The only vacation I took as a child was with my grandfather. We went out to my godfather's farm in Swanton. I stayed there for the summer and worked out there. I did not get paid, but at least it provided a change of scenery and I enjoyed myself.

I do remember we used to go to the Boys' Club years ago, at Big Silver Lake, Michigan for two weeks in the summertime. It cost us \$7.50. We had a hell of a time scraping that money together from our meager paper routes. (While I was away, my mother, father, or brother would take over my route.) The camp was directly



across from the Boy Scout Camp. Kids from Birmingham and kids from our softball team would go.

At the camp, we had races, track, and we would compete against the Boy Scouts. Every year we would carve our names and the date on a large rock. I wonder if that rock is still there? That was so long ago. It was always a pleasant vacation.

## **Disturbing Memory**

We were playing cowboys and Indians when it started to storm heavily. There was a lot of lightning and a heavy downpour. Everybody started running for home and, in the commotion, a dog ran out into the street and bit me. I went to Dr. Marcus who put something in the wound and burned me where the dog had bitten me. I went home and told my father, who brought out his shot gun. He walked across the street into the field and shot the dog. The owner got mad although my father explained to him that the dog had bitten me. Dr. Marcus only charged us \$1.00 and nothing ever came of the fact that my father shot the dog.

## **Homes**

We lived in a four room apartment on Burger Street. We lived in the back. It had a spacious kitchen, one bedroom, and a dining room. It had only three rooms and an outdoor bathroom. All of the children in my family grew up in that apartment which we rented for \$12.00 a month. We had water, but no gas.

Years later, they did put an addition on the back, installed a hot water tank, a regular toilet, and a basin and bathtub in the bathroom. My mother and father slept in one room with the youngest kid, while my brother and I slept in the dining room on a sleeper sofa. Despite the close quarters, my brother and I never had any special problems; we never fought or anything.

When we got married, we moved in with my wife's parents. They had a beautiful house with all hardwood floors. It had a front room, a dining room, a bedroom off the kitchen, a back porch, an upstairs bathroom, and two bedrooms on the second floor.

Once, when we had just returned from a vacation in Brooklyn, Michigan, we were told that they had decided to move! They had been planning the move long before they let us know about it. So, we needed a place right away. My brother-in-law asked us why we hadn't considered buying their house from them. So, we did!

It didn't really need much work because many repairs had already been made to it. At the time, it was really a modern house. My wife painted the outside of the house by herself because I was working two jobs at the time. Several years later, we had the house sided. We lived there for fourteen years. Then, I built a house on East Eastmoreland in Oregon, Ohio and I have lived there ever since.

My wife took care of her father the last couple years of his life when he was sick. She moved out there to live with him. I would go to work at 5:30 and I would drop her off at the farm on my way. Then, when I came home at 3:00, I would stay until about 9:00 until my son got home from farming. Then, he would take over until the next day. One day I said to my wife, "This is crazy! Why don't you just move out there? That way, you could take care of him all day long."

He always wanted to go to the rest home because he felt like he was a burden to us. How could he be a burden? He was our father and this was his place. Now, we are out there on the farm.

## **Sounds from the Radio**

On Monday nights, we listened to the radio to *Lux Radio Theater*. Everybody would sit there at night and listen to WJR Detroit. We had to imagine what was going on. We used to tune into *Amos and Andy*, *The Shadow*, *Jimmy Allan*, *The Green Hornet*, and *The Spider*. There were shows and plays.

When Pearl Harbor was bombed, we were in the church basement with the Catholic Youth Group. (There was a back room where we used to gamble.) It was Sunday and the radio was playing. At 1:00 p.m., the flash came through. Pearl Harbor had been bombed! None of us knew what Pearl Harbor was! After that, we found out that it meant war. All the kids in the neighborhood ended up in the service.

## **My Cooking Career**

I can cook. I used to cook when I was in the service. While we were stationed in the States, some would get three day passes, but I stayed at the base over the weekends and got to know the cook. I was Hungarian. I breaded some chicken and did some cooking. In the Army, all they fed us on Sunday nights were cold cuts and a Waldorf salad (apples, raisins, and chopped up celery.) At first, maybe fifteen or twenty of them would be eating. Soon it was twenty-five and the number kept increasing. After that, I didn't want to be a cook.

The food was there, I just prepared it my own way, using my own style of seasoning. There wasn't a whole lot of flexibility, though. In the military we had to cook like they told us to cook. However, everyone liked my cooking style so nobody complained. Because of this I was well liked and could get any special favors that I wanted. I could easily get weekend passes. But then officers started making special requests for meals. Then everybody started asking for my cooking and it became a huge hassle. I wanted to please everybody, but I couldn't. I quit and went back to going out on three day passes with the guys.

## **Hobbies**

I plant vegetables. I also help my son with farming. I used to go hunting and fishing. I used to go up to Minnesota for five weeks every year with my wife and son. We went for a couple years and then we just gave it up because we were getting older and it was such a long drive. Once in a while, I go fishing out on the lake, but not too often. We still like to travel, though.

One time, I bought a 1973 Galaxy 500 Ford and we went up to Minnesota. We went fishing, came home, and before we unpacked, my son said, "Let's go to Cedar Point." So, we got in the car and drove to Cedar Point. We spent the whole day there and when we came home I said to my wife, "Let's go to Niagara Falls." We came home from Cedar Point at 9:00 p.m. and at midnight we went to Niagara Falls.

We took our honeymoon in Niagara Falls. In 1946, there were hardly any tourists there. This time, however, there were so many people, elbow to elbow. I took a lot of pictures. When we had them developed, we discovered that I had forgotten to take the cover off. We stayed there for a couple of days and I remember trying to take pictures of the falls at night when they were lit up. Taking pictures was once a hobby of mine.

## **Advice**

Kids today are rude and they just don't care. They come into stores and to school hollering and wearing their caps. They seem to have no respect for their elders, property, or anything. One of the most important lessons they should be learning in school is that of respect. They should be staying in school until they are mature enough to go out into the work force. While they are young, they should be encouraged to learn all they can from every member of their community.





# Father Martin Hernady

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*'Memories of Birmingham'  
presented to the Birmingham Cultural Center*

*Introduction by Yolanda Danyi Szuch*

In today's world, change tests our level of comfort. We buy products that don't last, that soon have to be repaired or replaced. We are bombarded by news even while in our homes. We see an unstable world with constant change. We have little time to relax and take life easy. Reluctantly, we adapt to all these changes; yet we yearn for constancy in our lives to give us strength, to give us peace. All of us are familiar with Saint Stephen's and the Birmingham neighborhood has been blessed with such a constant. Say, "Saint Stephen's" and you say "Father Hernady." For forty years, he has made our lives better. It has been comforting to know that at the helm of Saint Stephen's is a spiritual leader who values the Hungarian heritage. I am pleased and honored to introduce Father Hernady.

## **Beginnings**

I arrived at St. Stephen's in 1954. I had never been a pastor in Hungary. I was ordained and then they sent me to school. They didn't believe that I was old enough to be a priest, so I went to school in Rome for two years. Then, the Iron Curtain came down, and I was not able to return to Hungary.

Monsignor Montini was the Secretary of State in the Vatican. (Later, he became Pope Paul VI.) In 1950, the American Bishops were in Rome for the Quinquennial Visitation. Montini asked the American Bishops, "There are some Hungarian boys around here, why don't you take them?" That is how I was sent to North Carolina. I was there almost five years. Somehow, the Bishop of Toledo knew there was already a Hungarian priest in North Carolina, so I was sent to the Hungarian Parish in Toledo.

In those days, you had to be so old before you could receive a parish. It was strictly based upon seniority; yet, in 1960, I was made a pastor. I was very young. I really

realized this the first time when a salesman stopped in. He came by only a few days after I had been in charge and he wanted to sell something to the church. When I opened the door, he said, "I would like to talk to the pastor." I said, "You are talking to him. You can leave."

## First Impressions

This was the first time I was exposed to Hungarian rural traditions. I had been a city boy all my life and I had no idea about what country life was like in Hungary. I will try to recall some of my experiences when I arrived. I remember the first feather party was in November. We were at the bar, (of course, that is a part of Birmingham) and Franky Bires said, "This is a good man from Birmingham." And I said, "England?" To which he responded, "No, we are in Birmingham now." I didn't know that. I didn't know the Birmingham pronunciation of Hungarian names either. I remember the first phone call I answered. The voice said, "This is Balogh Cleaners. You can come and pick up your things." I asked, "Would you kindly tell me who you are?" She repeated, "Mrs. Balogh." I had no idea what she said. I asked, "Would you spell that for me?" She said, "B.a.l.o.g.h.!"

Another thing I had to learn was some of the Hungarian-Birmingham language which required a knowledge of English. I remember Dr. Farkas was at our house once and he said, "payda." I didn't understand him. Finally, I asked him, "Would you please explain what you just said?" "Payda" meant "pay day."

I was born in 1924 in a city. I knew Hungarian history and geography that we had to learn in grade school, but those of us in the cities paid little attention to the countryside life. I had to come to Toledo to see that there were tremendous differences between rural counties and the city. For example, I was afforded the opportunity to witness the Christmas play, *Abauj Bethlehemes*. I had heard about the play. I knew some of its songs but I had never had the chance to see it performed. In the city, we didn't do those things and my first Christmas Eve at Saint Stephen's was a great experience. John Monoky, Jupe Juhasz and the rest of the fellows sang very beautifully as they proceeded down the main aisle at church. I am proud that in these years, we have the play only in the church. I think that was a good move. The actors used to begin at five o'clock in the afternoon and would visit "certain places" [the local bars]. I recall that by the time they would arrive at the church, at midnight, they would be in a particularly "festive" mood.

When I arrived, I discovered that the people in Birmingham were raised very religiously. They were very devout. Many got up every morning for six o'clock Mass. They came to the church at six o'clock and immediately after, would run to the bus station to get to work. Nevertheless, they were at church every single morning even though it was very difficult. I remember bowling with the Holy Name Society. We would start at nine o'clock at night and we would consider it a good night if we finished by midnight. When the pin-setter broke down, we would always finish well after midnight, and I had to get up early in the morning so that by six o'clock I could be in church to say Mass. I could not do that today.

The ladies were devout and pious. Every Sunday, they came to church twice. I saw the same faces from the seven-thirty or ten o'clock Mass and at the Benediction held at two o'clock in the afternoon. So, for them, Sunday was a full day and on top of that they attended the Novena to the Irish Madonna every Saturday night.

We had beautiful customs. I remember the Holy Rosary Society's custom of having a president for life. There was a democratic election but once somebody had achieved the presidency, that person stayed there until she could no longer act as a leader.

We also had the Procession on the first Sunday of each month when we had the "Titok Cserelés," the exchanging of the Mysteries of the Rosary. I learned that "Titok" means "secret prayer," (the Mysteries of the Rosary) and "Cserelés" means "exchange."

We still have the Procession at the funerals, but in the past, attendance was much higher and all of the members of the Holy Rosary Society would come and give a touching farewell to the deceased parishioner. We used to have monthly Holy Hour with the Altar Society. I heard people my age say, "When I was a kid, Father, we had to come for Benediction every Sunday afternoon, but when it was over, we were given nickels and we would go to the movies."

## **Church Traditions**

I have always enjoyed the house blessings. That was a time when I got to know people. I went house to house. I always looked at the pictures in the homes and I recognized the children and other relatives so I discovered who was related to whom. Within ten years, I believe I knew more about the people of Birmingham than some who were born and raised there. A few years ago, I went to Arizona and met a lady



who grew up in Birmingham. She moved to Arizona to become a housekeeper for a priest. I visited the priest and for a couple nights, his housekeeper and I did nothing but talk about the neighborhood house by house. We knew who lived in each house. I wish the entire American culture was more like that again—when people knew each other!

When I first came to Toledo, the first thing that impressed me was the church. When I was in North Carolina, I was at little mission churches. They were very unique but they could not be compared to such an exquisite church as Saint Stephen's. It was built in 1914 and it is hard to believe that anyone had the courage to build a church as large and as lovely as that. Now, if someone wants to build a church, the Bishop demands that fifty-percent of the cost be in the bank before building begins. I am certain that those people in 1914 did not have fifty-percent of the cost in the bank but they had stamina and courage and were very generous.

I went to see an old gentleman who was here when the church was being built. Then he was working at Willys Overland and I am sure that was a good job in those days. He said, "Father Elmer came to see me about the church and I gave him my whole 'payda.'" (They received their pay in envelopes.) I didn't even open it and I gave it to him. It was all in coins." I looked at the man and said that I couldn't understand how it was possible to build a church from mere coins. He could see that I was surprised and then he explained, "At that time, we got our 'payda' in gold coins and there was a twenty dollar gold coin in that envelope." That is why he gave it to the Pastor for the church.

Upon my arrival, another thing which I really enjoyed was our wonderful church choir. They practiced every Friday night. Practice was also a social gathering. After they practiced a few hymns, they would socialize. Paul Thomas knew many Hungarian songs by heart and practice also became an entertainment event. They sang and drank (part of Birmingham's culture) but it was a nice family affair. I will never forget Paul Thomas and Steve Molnar who were the Choir Directors and some of the older people like Mr. Junga, Mr. Steve Orosz, and Mr. Veres. For them, it was a week night out. They were all very close to each other.

We also had big parish dinners. It was so interesting to see that so many people came. They introduced themselves or someone would introduce me to them. I remember once, a strange gentleman came up to me and said, "Father, Let me buy you a drink." I just looked at him. Then, he said, "Don't worry, I am the liquor agent!" Also, I really loved to watch the cooks. The many sweet ladies cooked



through the night to prepare for those dinners; yet, they were always ready. I used to say, "What will happen when these cooks can't do it?" Then, we got Julia, so this tremendous tradition stayed alive. Now we have Anna Mae and I hope someday, someone will step into her shoes. People from the entire city come down to our place and they know about Saint Stephen's.

## **Saint Stephen's School**

The school too, impressed me greatly. When I went to a Catholic School in Hungary, I never had nuns. The majority of schools did not have nuns as teachers. We in America, are finally learning to have Catholic Schools without nuns, but, I'll always remember their dedication. When I first moved to Toledo, the nuns received thirty dollars a month. That is why there was no need for tuition. When I became a pastor, we collected ten dollars from the students for books. After many years, we finally broke down and had to establish a tuition.

The backbone of the church in America was the nuns and I can certainly say that it is also true for St. Stephen's. St. Stephen's was blessed with excellent nuns. I can especially remember one nun, Sister Cecelia, who was our organist. God bless her. She wasn't a young lady, but she played for us simply because she loved music. She played the organ twice a day at six o'clock and eight o'clock and she would play for every funeral. She also played on the weekends for the Novena and then on Sundays, she played at three Masses. When Paul Thomas played at ten o'clock Mass, she came to church to pray. When God made Cecelia, he broke the mold.

## **Commitment to Education**

Then it was a joy to go to school. We had strong discipline, although we had thirty-five children in the classroom. I don't remember ever having a single major problem. Kids are always kids but when we put our foot down, they were always on their best behavior. I would say there was a very effective discipline program. The secret to our discipline was that the child listened to the teacher because they didn't want their parents to receive a bad report. Then, the parents backed up the teachers, unlike today. Now, when a teacher tells a child, "I will call your mother," the child says, "Why don't you do that? She doesn't care anyhow."

Then, it seemed, the parents had tremendous wisdom. Perhaps they didn't have any formal education, but they knew the value of education. Parents would say, "I am working very hard for you but you must study so you can have a better life." After

the 1950s, a lot of our students went to college, did post-graduate work, and some received doctoral degrees. They had goals. They knew they had to work to achieve those goals. That is different with today's children. Every child wants to be a "big shot" right away. They don't realize success is a long road and they aren't willing to accept the hard work that must go into it. That is a change. I remember once, a young man came over to the rectory and said, "Father, can I go into school to study? At home, we have too many children and I cannot concentrate." I said, "By all means." I was so happy to see that willingness to work. He went to the University of Toledo by bus because he couldn't afford a car. If someone really wants to do something, it can be done.

It was a momentous turning point in the life of the parish when so many children became educated. I recall another case. A boy's mother wanted him to go to Central Catholic High School, and she was more than willing to pay for tuition. Somebody, a smart aleck, stopped him on the street and asked, "Aren't you ashamed that you take your mother's money to go to school? Why don't you go to work?" The young man went home and felt very uneasy until his mother asked him, "Who gives you that money, me or the person who made that remark?" Children got the support of their parents.

## **Our Church Building**

By 1964, the parish became solvent. This was really a special time. Through the early part of the sixties, we put a new roof on the church and the school. Also, we installed new steeples. The steeples were so old that I could push my finger through the ceiling. It was always leaking. So, we put on new copper at the top of the steeple and one lady commented, "Father, I don't like it. It was so beautiful and green." I said, "Be patient, the copper will turn green again." Of course, it is green by now.

The church's design is outstanding. The priest who was here in 1914, was from Hungary and I'm told he tried to make the church resemble a particular Abbey church in Hungary. Supposedly, the Abbey was built in the early part of the eleventh century. I've been back to Hungary a few times and I didn't see too many similarities other than the front. However, it really is a masterpiece. Four to five years ago, at a large wedding, there were a lot of people from out of town, and at the reception, an elderly gentleman approached me. He was a very interesting and funny man. He said, "Father, I didn't pay any attention to you during the service." I said, "You are not the first one!" Then he said, "I will tell you why. I am a mason by profession and I couldn't help but admire the beautiful masonry work with the bricks

in the church. Those are real masterpieces.” Now, nobody could duplicate them. Nobody would volunteer to accept the job. I don’t even think it is possible to commission anyone to build a church like this today.

## **The Fire**

We remodeled the church twice, including the installation of new pews. Unfortunately, we had a fire in 1971. That was a very miserable day; but again, the people were very good. They got together and worked hard to restore the church. When we had the fire, I didn’t know where to turn. It was so horrible. I remember people came and tried to save the church. I know that the fire department was ready to force themselves into the church from the front where we had just purchased new, beautiful doors. I will never forget Bob Toth came and said, “I know my way from the Sacristy.” He ran through the smoke-filled church and opened the door from the inside so our brand new doors weren’t ruined.

Change is difficult. It is very difficult when you remodel. It is different when you build an entirely new church, especially when a congregation is starting from scratch. In that situation, whatever you do, is more than nothing. But when you are accustomed to seeing the same old pictures, then it becomes hard to accept something new. Some people said, after we remodeled, that the older church was nicer. I can say this much; we were fortunate to have a good painter when we remodeled. He was just breaking into the professional circles. Now, he is a well known artist. He has pictures in the Vatican Museum. He has his own gallery in Hungary and has been on television many times. The last time I went to Europe, I saw a small picture of his work in an art center and it was selling for \$400. If all of our pictures in the church were added together they would be worth almost one million dollars. We have learned to love his work.

I like our mosaics. They are magnificent and I am very proud that he took the time to work for Saint Stephen’s and accepted our commission. He came over from Europe three times.

## **Community Leadership**

In 1969, there was a new turn in the life of the parish. There were two phone calls which greatly influenced our lives. One afternoon, I received the first phone call around three o’clock from Mrs. Virginia Clifford, whom I didn’t know. Her husband was a research physician at MCO and he had just passed away. She said, “Father, do



you know what they are trying to do to your neighborhood?" I had no idea what she was talking about. I was young and wasn't very knowledgeable about politics. She was a delegate from the League of Women Voters and told me that the government was trying to build an overpass on Consaul Street. She was impartial; she was not from here. In fact, she was a complete stranger in town, but she had a good feeling toward the people in Birmingham. She said, "They want to tear up your nice neighborhood." That was the beginning.

After that, the city went through the motions. They held meetings, but the people in Birmingham were not really included. I realized what would happen. They had already obtained a grant. The corner of Consaul Street, after the trailer court, is empty. It is empty because, during this time, the city was leaving it available for the forthcoming overpass.

In the past three years, ownership of that piece of land had turned over about three times to push up the price. I thought to myself, "This guy put his money in the wrong place." That was the beginning of the Birmingham Coalition. It was a true renaissance of the neighborhood. It was a renewal, a time when the people from all of the churches and organizations got together. That was a time in which Birmingham demonstrated its valuable manpower. Courageous people emerged. They were unselfish, capable, dedicated workers and leaders, and good friends.

## **Birmingham Festival**

We had to show that Birmingham was alive and its people cared. We thought if the politicians could see this festival, they would never vote against us. Our festival became known, and not only throughout Toledo. People in other cities tried to imitate it.

We were the first to hold this kind of festival. Someone in another part of town organized another festival and spent too much money on it. The lady who was in charge of the festival had to go see the County Commissioners to ask for money. She told them, "Our thrust is a little different and our festival is much better than those on the other side of the river." Fritz Szollosi said, "Lady, you are talking to the wrong person, I am from that neighborhood!" When we had the festival, all the organizations became involved. John Bistayi helped greatly. We became good friends. On Saturday mornings, Joe Kocsis painted water hydrants. Mike Dandar also put in much time and effort to the festival.



## Special Friends

I will never forget John Maczko. I had never seen him before this crisis, but he was a born leader and he did a great job. Mr. Fritz Szollosi, the Postmaster, helped a lot. He hired college and high school students for part-time work. He would ask me, "Who is the next student to get the job, Father?" If I nominated a young man, he had the job. My only condition was that he would have to serve at every ten o'clock Mass, so we would always have four to six boys at every ten o'clock Mass. Joe Szegedi very thoroughly compiled a scrapbook. If anyone is curious about Birmingham history, after 1969, they should consult Joe Szegedi. Also, Oscar Kinsey and Nancy Packo worked very hard to put the scrapbook together as well. I did some research for it too. This was a time when Birmingham really became well known in Toledo.

The second influential phone call I received was from Bishop Donovan and he said, "Go to a workshop in Washington and meet Monsignor Baroni." I believe that he was the most dynamic priest I have ever met in my life. He was the one who really helped us in Birmingham. The whole organizing plan for the neighborhood coalition mushroomed. We had one million dollars channeled into the neighborhood and people from Washington came to see it. They said they thought the money was being put to good use in Birmingham and were happy to see the results. The housing stock improved and we had ten miles of new roads put in Birmingham.

It was then that I learned that the other side of Consaul Street is not considered Birmingham. Birmingham is, as I was told, "north of Consaul." They didn't want to put any new streets in around the church's area because they said that was not Birmingham. They were wrong.

We met many people through Monsignor Baroni and he gave us much help. Through him, we purchased the senior citizen's van, which we still use. Through Monsignor's office, we also got the Social Security Program. We were given a little grant for a small salary for someone to locate elderly ladies who had never received any Social Security because their spouses died before the system began. We did not realize this, but there was a law that stated if a person was not eligible for Social Security, they could qualify for Social Security Implementation benefits. We discovered there were between sixty to seventy people who could receive, for the first time in their lives, a little check from Uncle Sam. Monsignor Baroni became a very dear friend of mine and I really love the man.

## Community Spokesperson

We also obtained a senior citizens' nutrition site. First, it was difficult. Certain people were stalling it. We talked to everybody including our congressman. "O.K. Father, you will have it in a week," I was told. But we waited for two to three weeks and nothing happened. I decided to go see the regional director. When we got there, I said, "Doctor, you made a promise three weeks ago that we were to have a nutrition site." He looked around and said, "Father, this is only for poor people." I responded, "Sir, don't you ever say this in my presence about our people. Our people are just as poor as anyone else but they are bashful and they don't speak up and holler." Three days later, we had a nutrition site.

Monsignor Baroni had a workshop in Toledo, after I returned from Washington. Peter Ujvagi and Marcy Kaptur, who were still young college graduates, attended. Peter then went to work for Baroni and became very knowledgeable about the work. That is also the way that Marcy became involved in politics. She started to work for Monsignor Baroni in Chicago as a city planner. After that, she was put on staff at the White House when Monsignor Baroni became the Sub Secretary in H.U.D. After the election, when President Carter left the White House, she didn't know what to do. She was planning to go to MIT. One time, when she was in Boston, she was supposed to spend a few hours with me while I waited for a plane. Marcy didn't show up. I was kind of indignant until I returned to Toledo, and Peter Ujvagi informed me that she was running for Congress.

After meeting Monsignor Baroni, I became a member of his board in Washington. I had to go to many different workshops in New York, Boston and Washington. They were very beneficial and I enjoyed them. It's great to travel, especially when someone else pays for it!

One of the most important events in my life was when I participated in a round table discussion on national television with President Carter in Detroit. I really do admire the man. About six or seven of us were waiting in a room before the program. President Carter just walked in by himself and very calmly said, "I am your President." Then he came up to me and said, "Father, I have a question to ask. What should we do with the Crown of Saint Stephen?" I said, "Mr. President, I'll tell you if you don't quote me. The crown belongs to the people of Hungary." At the time, I knew I couldn't say it publicly, yet I'm glad I said that then because it was beneficial for the spirit of Hungary. I felt it would be valuable to have the crown somewhere where people could see it as it was the symbol of the Hungarian state. It should not

be in Fort Knox in some kind of safe. I think history has revealed that this was the right decision.

I knew all the politicians who always came to Birmingham and I became good friends with many of them. There was a lady, an important official, who once, when she came to our dinner, said when I greeted her, "Gee whiz Father, which Hungarian girl needs a job now?" The elected officials were nice. If I asked them to help someone get a job, they were very understanding. I remember one woman needed a job because her husband was laid off. She had to take the typing test. Her typing was very good but she hadn't had a job for five years; she was out of practice. She went home and practiced for six weeks. Then, she got the job and still works there.

Once, one of our boys got into a fight with the police. I think he was "very happy" because he had just come from the Knights of Columbus where they had some kind of social hour. The two policemen were in plain clothes. They were watching some of the local bars. It was two o'clock in the morning. In the dark, the boy put up a good fight against the two officers. They took him downtown and the next morning, he had to appear in court. They let him go home, and a few days later he had to appear in court. I said to him, "Don't hire a lawyer, it is expensive. I will take you down to the referee."

I was discussing it with the policemen and I told them, "I understand that you are embarrassed that one man put up such a strong fight against two. You must understand that he did not know you were policemen because you were in plain clothes." When he appeared before the judge, I told the boy, "Don't say anything. Just sit there." I tried to get eye contact with the judge and it worked. The young man was given a suspended sentence. He had to pay the court costs and was on probation for one year. When the judge pronounced the sentence he said, "I am quite sure that Father Hernady is going to watch over you to make sure that you keep your probation."

## Visitors

We had a lot of visitors in the rectory in the years I was there. Vice President Humphrey visited. It was interesting to see the Secret Service come in and look around. They went to the bathroom and looked to make sure that I didn't have a bomb in there! When I saw Vice President Humphrey on television, he didn't appeal to me. Meeting him in person, I found him to be very affable, a congenial person. Television sometimes doesn't give the right impression. Vice President Mondale



and Governor Gilligan also visited. I don't know what kind of politician the Governor was, but I can say that he was a true scholar and a very impressive and kind person. I hear he had trouble talking to people at rallies because he was so intellectual. I considered him to be a very nice human being and I enjoyed his company.

I was happy to have had four cardinals visit the rectory. The first one was Cardinal Mindszenty who ordained me. After he ordained me, the Communists sent him to jail. He was a well known person and we held a reception for him. We had a dinner for him down at the Commodore Perry. I called Bishop Donovan and said, "Bishop, you are the host. I know how to handle bishops, but I don't know how to handle cardinals." In 1976, when we celebrated the bicentennial, we had Cardinal Lekai who was the successor to Cardinal Mindszenty. He was a kind person. I wish he was alive today because he was a very dynamic individual who would know how to rebuild the church in Hungary.

Then, in 1989, just as political change was taking place in Hungary, we had Cardinal Paskai, the Archbishop of Budapest. Then, we had Cardinal of Karachi from Pakistan who was a very interesting and holy person. He just passed away and I was sorry to hear that. At the last conclave for the election of the pope, he was mentioned as a possibility.

One of the outstanding visitors I had was Archbishop Kada. Once he was my roommate in the seminary. Now he is an Archbishop and a Papal Nuncio to Germany which is an important place in the life of the church. Many bishops from Hungary visited our parish. Some of them were with me in the Seminary. Our latest Hungarian visitor was Ambassador, Dr. Paul Tar. He is an outstanding person. His wife is French and a devout, prominent Catholic lady.

## **Looking Back**

I really am a very happy man. I have had an interesting life. When I was in school, I never dreamed that it would be like this. Usually, priests go to school, try to get a degree, and then teach in the Seminary and then move on from there. I was offered a contract from Seton Hill College in Greensborough. I was tempted to take it, but somehow, the good Lord told me not to do it. Looking back, after many years, I am very glad I didn't accept that contract. Birmingham needed me. I believe Birmingham is strong and will live for a long time. Let us both pray and work for that.



# Margaret “Peg” (Markovich) Horvath

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*Interviewed by Randy Nissen*

**M**y mother, Sophia Beri, came to this country in 1913. Her twin sister Julia stayed in Austria-Hungary. My mother came with an uncle to join her older brother Karoly and her Aunt Szofia Sabo, who lived in Rossford, Ohio. My mother married John Szempias and together they built a house in Birmingham.

They had three sons, Steve, John and Joseph and a daughter, also named Margaret, who was killed in an accident at the age of two. John Szempias died when he was thirty-seven, so my mother was widowed at age thirty and she married my father in 1928. I was the only child of the marriage. My father, Anthony Markovich, came from Croatia, a part of Austria-Hungary. He had two daughters and a son from a previous marriage. His first wife died and the three children did not come to the United States with him. They lived with their grandmother in Croatia.

## **Early Years**

I grew up in Birmingham. I went to Birmingham School from 1934-1943. I graduated from Waite High School in 1947. I have attended Mary Manse College and the University of Toledo since that time. I began attending college when I was quite a bit older, while I was in my forties. I had left school to go to work after my high school graduation.

## **Social Life**

The Waite games during high school were special times. The guys did a lot of cruising. The girls did not have cars, so we did a lot of walking. We congregated around the Hungarian Reformed Church where we belonged to the Young People's Organization. I guess there was a Catholic Youth Organization at Saint Stephen's but it wasn't very active. So, even though I belonged to Holy Rosary and Saint Stephen's, I was more involved in activities at the Calvin United Church.

F.M. Reid's store was catty-corner from Birmingham School and near the library. Mrs. Reid was quite a nice lady. She expected the children to be very self-disciplined while in her store. In other words, at certain times, such as at lunch hour from school, we had to be on our best behavior. We didn't roam the store just running around or anything like that. We had to purchase something. She was very kind. When I started collecting stamps, she took the time to explain things to me. She knew I was serious about it and I wasn't just looking around to see what I could get into. She helped me make selections and good buys.

## **Work**

I went to work first at Mercy Hospital, then to the Lion Store. This was within the first year and a half since I graduated. I was only seventeen. Many places would not hire people younger than eighteen, but they made an exception for me. I really wanted to work at Toledo Edison where my mother was working cleaning in the offices and the plant. In 1948, when I turned eighteen, I was hired to work at the Acme power plant of Toledo as a mail carrier. It was at Acme Station where I met and married Andy Horvath, a fellow employee. We rented an apartment on Valentine Street. I worked at Toledo Edison for ten years. During that time, I gave birth to twins, but they did not survive. I went back to work until I became pregnant with our first surviving child, Eric. Later Carl, Lynne, and Kurt were born.

## **Religion**

Parents made a conscious effort to separate Catholic children from the Protestant ones. But that did not stop many of us from intermarrying. At that time it was severely frowned upon to take part in a marriage outside the Catholic Church. We were also discouraged from taking part in the ceremonies of mixed marriages. As a matter of fact, we were discouraged from even attending! The Catholics and the Protestants were quite separate.

I was rather independent, maybe because I had been exposed to a mixed marriage myself. My mother was raised Calvinist in her town of Retkosberencs in Hungary. She was a little more relaxed about religion. Both of her husbands were Catholic so she became a Catholic, but she was laid back about it. I remember one time I told her that I couldn't eat a meal that she had made. It was Friday and the meal contained some meat. She said, "Margaret, it is not what goes into your mouth that is a sin, it is what comes out." This was her religious philosophy, as simplistic as it may seem.

I was involved with the Girl Scouts at Calvin United. We had parties there. We also had neighborhood dances. One was called the Szureti (Grape Harvest) Ball, held at St. Stephen's. My mother loved to dance and anytime there was a dance or a wedding, she would go and she took me when I was a small child. Sometimes she liked to just go and watch a dance too.

The neighborhood was very family oriented. Even small children were welcome at the dances and the neighborhood meetings. Strick's Hall was where they performed plays and held dances. Suto's Grove, near Reno Beach was away from Birmingham but was basically a place where Hungarians gathered to celebrate summer and picnic and hold festivals.

There were three Catholic churches in the neighborhood. St. Michael's was the church of the Eastern Rite, St. Stephen's was the Hungarian Church and Holy Rosary was a Slovak church. Slovaks, at the time, were just becoming independent after the First World War. I went to both churches. I was baptized at St. Stephen's and made my Communion and Confirmation at Holy Rosary because it was nearer to our home. I was married at Saint Stephen's, so I felt like I was a member even though I was always more involved in things that were going on at Holy Rosary because of the proximity. When I was in the fifth grade, Holy Rosary church burned down and the principal of Birmingham was gracious enough to invite the students to attend school there instead. They had their nuns come and they actually used the building. I don't understand it now, because of the church and state separation. They are so strict about it now. Mr. Maternyi, the principal, somehow used a convincing truth, that if they weren't allowed to come with their nuns, the children would have wound up coming to Birmingham anyway because it was the next nearest school. They would have just poured in and there wouldn't have been enough teachers.

## **Occupations**

My dad, and many other parents, worked at Inter-Lake Iron. As a younger person, he was a molder and then, as he grew older, he became a crane operator. He once was injured by the crane. Every once in awhile, they had accidents when the cable would snap and they had some fatalities. Dad's knee cap was broken, so he walked with a limp after his accident.

Comparatively, the workers there were treated well. I'm not sure if that was due to an agreement or, perhaps, management just came through. I know during the Depression years, my dad did work three days a week. Instead of laying off many of



their men, and of course losing some skilled workers, during the hard times, they allowed them to work three days to keep their jobs. I don't believe he had health benefits. Dad developed silicosis tuberculosis, which occurred as a direct result of his time as a molder. This condition was considered to be a fatal disease. He died and according to his death certificate, his death was "industrially caused." This meant nothing. I probably received \$13 a month Social Security from the government. My mother did not even receive that because she had to go out and work and she earned a little over that amount. As a matter of fact, when I was a student at Waite, I worked summers at Mercy Hospital and if my pay check was more than \$13, I had to return my social security check. My mother allowed me to use that money for school transportation, lunches, and clothing. I learned to manage money on that basis. I had to spread it around.

## **Food**

I still cook like my mom but only on special occasions. The type of baking that we did worked best when there were a couple of ladies in the kitchen. I worked with my mom as a young girl and together, we did a lot of cooking and baking. There was slaughtering too. My aunt who lived in Bradner, Ohio raised pigs and we would bring one home and make this spicy, Hungarian sausage in a casing with rice and liver. In the fall, we would make sausages and render lard.

## **Easter and Dousing**

Easter was always a bigger holiday celebration at our house than Christmas. At Easter, my mom's brother from Delray (a Hungarian section of Detroit) would come down to visit. I recall a custom called "sprinkling." The Monday after Easter, little girls stayed home from school so little boys could come and sprinkle them. (I am almost certain this does not happen anymore.) If the girls were lucky enough and the boys had some money, then they would get some nice, diluted cologne. It was a courting ritual that originated in Hungary. The young gentlemen went around and sprinkled their ladies with diluted perfume.

It turned into a little money-making deal in the neighborhood. The boys would go around and the mothers or fathers allowed their girl to give them a few cents for the sprinkling. If they really went out and were energetic, they could make a dollar or so, which was good money at the time.



In grade school, I remember the boys coming to do this. Most of them would just spray perfume on the head and then, of course, some of them carried it to a joke. My girlfriend said her dad had gotten a bucket of water and doused her mother with it. Sprinkling was still being done when I left grade school. Whether it continued after that, I can't be sure. I am willing to bet that the tradition died down a great deal after 1955.

## **Earring Custom**

My mother believed, very sincerely, that pierced ears with gold in them improved vision. She never had my ears pierced, even though I wore glasses as a young girl. I wonder if she was afraid that it wouldn't work. Many of the little girls wore little turquoise or plain gold earrings at two or three years old. Even today, little girls are getting their ears pierced. Maybe another reason my mother never had my ears done was that she always said, "We are not gypsies."

Her mother had dark hair and eyes, and her dad had dark brown hair and blue eyes. Grandmother used to get teased about being a gypsy because she was so dark. Gypsies lived a very free life; whereas my relatives were farmers who had to work hard in the fields. There were gypsies in the neighborhood. The Miller Tribe used to come into Toledo for the funerals. They would have huge funerals. We saw gypsies at the carnivals as fortune tellers and things like that. I went to a carnival on Front Street with my sister-in-law when I was about fourteen years old and a gypsy lady was reading palms and fortune-telling. I wouldn't take my hand out of my pocket because I was deathly afraid she was going to get the few dollars that I had to spend at the carnival.

## **Racial Prejudice**

In our end of the neighborhood, there was a big flat. It was an apartment building and we had at least three black families living there at one time. When we lived on Woodford St., there was a little house behind our home which was the little house my mother and her first husband had built all those years ago. It had only three rooms. She rented this small house to an older, grandparent-type, black couple. My mother had no trouble with them. She did tell me, though, that when they had been living in Homestead, Pennsylvania, they left there because she had been warned by a friendly black family to get out of the area. The family told my mother that her husband (who did not like blacks) was in some danger.

I didn't experience any of that myself because my mother was racially tolerant. Her attitude about blacks was that they were just like anyone else. To her, the only people whom she had a lower opinion of were those who were lazy. She worked alongside many blacks for years. She was really very unprejudiced.

## **Ethnic Groups**

For many years in Europe, the Slovaks had to go to Hungarian schools and speak Hungarian. They resented it very much, so there was some animosity between the two groups. I didn't really have any negative feelings towards Slovaks because my father was Croatian and having some mixture, I really was not in the position to act superior.

There was quite a rift between the Czechs and the Slovaks or Bohemians. They had those three distinct divisions and they were very particular about being called by the correct name. I am surprised that the Czech and Slovak governments had such a peaceful parting, because I saw a lot of conflict between the three groups in the neighborhood. As a child, I always felt somewhere in the middle of everything being Croatian and Hungarian.

My brothers went to St. Stephen's School for awhile. They did not speak English until they came to Birmingham School. At home, I never spoke Hungarian. I can understand Hungarian today as long as the message is not too complex. I visited Hungary and that helped me pick up the language even more. Sometimes it seems like in my mind I am ready to speak it, but my mouth won't let the words come out.

Our end of the neighborhood was a mixture; it was not exclusively Hungarian. Moving down Craig Street towards Holy Rosary, we had Italians, Slovaks, Romanians, Hungarians, and Irish. We had the Duris and Sevela families who were Slovak, the Cains who were Irish, and the Baloghs who were Hungarian. Theresa Brewer's family, which was Romanian, lived on Valentine Street, so it was a little more multi-ethnic at our end. Closer to Saint Stephen's Church and the Hungarian Reformed Church, there was a greater concentration of Hungarians.

## **Church**

I remember Father Reineck. He wasn't a Hungarian priest, but he used to say he was Hungarian by osmosis from being at the church for so long. Father Eordogh was the Monsignor there and my husband and I thought we were going to have Father

Reineck marry us, but Father Eordogh said, “No, I married your parents and I will marry you.”

Baptisms were very early. Within a week of birth, the child was baptized. I can remember talking about this tradition along with some of the problems of different religions. Someone who was sharing the conversations related a story about how their child was practically kidnapped and brought over to the church to be baptized because it had been a mixed marriage. A couple of people that I know had that happen to them. I have a girlfriend whose mother was Protestant but her father was not. The child’s aunt went to the church and baptized her as a Catholic and then the child grew up Catholic. I wonder if the mother figured that, after the fact, baptism could not be undone and decided she would allow the child to grow up Catholic.

## **Faces and Places**

I remember the “rag man” with his horse drawn cart. I don’t know what nationality he was, but he might have been Jewish because this was in 1938, and during that time, many Jewish people sold scrap iron and rags and things that happened to be useful. They used to come down the alleys and blow horns to let everyone know they were coming.

My brother, Joe, was quite a scrap hunter. He would go out to the dump and salvage what he could and the sheeny would come down the alley blowing his horn. One time, Joe apparently wanted to do a little better than he had been doing. He figured that if he had me sell things, maybe the sheeny would be a little more sympathetic to some little girl on his territory. I didn’t really know how to sell and I’m not sure whether I made more money than Joe, but I tried.

I think the “rag men” were Jewish because they owned the salvage companies during the war. They were hard workers and they had to ride through the streets behind a horse in the heat of the day. The ice men and the milk men did that too, at the time.

We had two other interesting fellows in the neighborhood. One was named “Popcorn Joe.” He was Italian. When I was twelve, I tried to find out what his real name was and all he ever told us was that it was “Popcorn Joe.” He used to push a little cart with popcorn around the streets of the neighborhood. He was a businessman, but if you really did not have a few pennies, he would sneak you a little bag of popcorn.



The other character was also Italian. He was a part of the track crew that worked on the railroad. The kids were afraid of him. He was an older gentleman and he wasn't very clean because railroad work is dusty and dirty. "Sam" is what we called him. He finally became enthralled with some woman. He was probably around forty when he began building a house. He dug the basement and built the foundation. I don't know what happened to the romance. She took off, probably with his savings, because he ended up living in that basement for many years, until he died.

We had a lot of fun because we had exposure to all different kinds of people. There were professional people there too, not many of them, but there were some business people.

Mr. Maternyi, the school principal, lived right in the neighborhood. Our scout leader, Marg Packo, lived there too. She was the niece of Tony Packo. Ethel Molnar, a teacher, was another neighbor.

Sokol Hall was on the corner of Valentine and Moravan Street. There was a big hall and below, in the basement, was a member's bar. I used to have to run there for beer for my father. They would wrap the beer to keep it cold and to keep it private so that I could safely bring it home to him. Above was the gymnasium and dance hall. The people who ran it were Czech or Slovak and they did the gymnastics that are performed on horsestrings. I was thrilled one time when they had a Sokol celebration at the corner of Woodford and Moravan. They were talented and could do a lot of things that can be seen on television during the Olympics. I was never able to do any of that, but some of my classmates were members of the gymnastics (Sokol) group.

## **Funerals**

The Hungarian philosophy is to cry on the day of birth and to celebrate with joy on the day of death. The ladies would cry and it was hard to tell why they were crying. It was at life, at what people must endure and death to them was a joyous thing (although they cried at funerals too, but then at the wake it was a joyful time.) They would celebrate and sing. When my dad died, they had the lying in state at home. I remember they had to remove the window to get the coffin in and then for three days the mourners stayed in our home.

On the last day, or the last evening, there was an all night ritual for the mourners. Everybody stayed up. Then, the coffin was finally taken to the church. My mother



did not have photographs taken. Earlier on, in the 1920s, they took pictures of the deceased family member out front of St. Stephen's. All the mourners at the funeral would be included in the background of the photo. I have one photo of my brother's father's funeral. I ended up keeping it because I sort of got to be the family historian for awhile.

## **Taverns**

There were a lot of bars in the neighborhood. I used to have to get my dad home on Friday nights and make sure that he didn't spend all his money. When my mother felt that it was time for him to come home, she would send me and I thought it was a great thing. I was probably only six or seven years old. There was no stigma for me to go into the bar. I was greeted cordially and my dad would buy me some pop and chips and then we would come home.

To me, this was his way of unwinding after a hard day's work at the foundry. Very often, there were just men. I remember more women in the bar after TV came in.

There were bars on Whittemore Street and then there was Sekerkas on Caledonia Street and Pastorek's Bar on the corner of Craig and Caledonia. Paul Slovak's parents owned a bar and they lived across the street from it. They served meals at the bar. I imagine during the times when single men worked and did not have a place to eat, they went to the bar across the street from the American Shipbuilding. During the war, there were many merchant marines coming into the area and they all poured into Nagy's on Front Street.

## **Sense of Community**

I wish we had more neighborhood activities in Birmingham today. I think this is one thing that my children missed. There were no sidewalks to walk on where you would get to know everybody along the path. When I would walk to the Tivoli Theater or to school, there were many houses along that path and I got to know all the families that way.

Kids today spend much more time with their peers than they do with adults and seniors. In the old days, there was always some other mother or grandmother, or someone watching out for all the children and probably scolding them too when they were doing wrong. There was a sense of unity in the neighborhood. Everything

wasn't always in accord, but we learned to live with each other and I think that is what is missing now.

Today you can live near people and never really become friends. Today, the church is my community. If people don't happen to be Catholic, or if they go to another Mass, I don't know them well. In contrast, when I was young, and I walked to church and school, maybe I didn't know all those people on the way intimately but I was interested enough to find out what was happening if someone was hurt or if someone got married. This is missing for our children.

# Nancy (Packo) Horvath

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*Interviewed by Dr. John Ahern*

**M**y grandmother and grandfather Packo came from Miskolc. I think all of my grandparents were very young when they came here. My maternal grandfather Galayda was about seventeen and my grandmother was about fifteen when she followed him here. He came to Pittsburgh to work in the coal mines with his relatives and then moved to Toledo. Grandma Packo was the cook. Her husband worked in a factory, probably on Front Street. Our family's cooking legacy began with Grandma Packo. As soon as she arrived in Toledo, she began to work doing church dinners and cooking for the Monsignor.

She must have had a great influence on the boys, because four restaurants were opened by her children. John, Joe, Tony, and for awhile, Frank, all had restaurants and Andrew worked in them too. She must have been a "tough one" because my uncle Joe, the heavy-weight boxer, changed his name from Paczko to Packo hoping she wouldn't recognize the name. She did not approve of prize fighting. He was more afraid of his mother than he was of his competitors!

I come from a long line of tough women. Life was tough for the other side of my family too. They came from Kerestete, a very tiny village beyond Miskolc. The road to Kerestete begins paved, then becomes gravel, until it finally deteriorates into a winding dirt path. The village has thirty-three houses and when Grandma left, over one hundred years ago, it had thirty-two. When I traveled there, it was weird. Childhood memories came flooding back to me. As children, we all lay in Grandma's bed, under her warm feather cover, and she would tell us stories about her childhood. I knew which house she lived in as a child; it was still there.

When I visited Kerestete, the people who lived there were doing the same things that Grandma had told me about. She said that when they took cows out to pasture in the morning, one person took them out and just one person brought them in again at night. The cows are not led into their yards because they know where they live; they go by themselves. I saw that happen. Another tradition I saw was the Hungarian fences. Every yard in the village was decoratively fenced.

A Packo tradition was to become restaurateurs. Five different brothers went to work in five different establishments. I think the first brother to open a restaurant must have been John Packo. My father, Tony, worked for him and then Joe Packo opened a restaurant on Front Street, right next to the fire station. Later he moved it downtown, to a spot near the courthouse. He had a classy establishment and served steak and other fancy foods. John remained in the sandwich and beer business and so did my father. Four years after he was married, my father borrowed one hundred dollars from my grandmother, Galayda, to open a cafe at 1935 Consaul Street in 1932.

### **Tony Packo's Hungarian Hot Dog**

During the Depression, our place was called a "confectionery," a term which covered a lot of things (including bootleg liquor). At that time, Dad started serving food too, so cooking became very important. Sandwiches were ten cents and he made his own sausage. Most customers couldn't afford ten cents, so they would have to ask for half of a sandwich, which was sort of an embarrassment. The bread man told my father about some smaller buns they were making in New York and he said he would try to get molds for them. He said you could put half of a sausage inside them. The bread man got the molds for the buns and they produced them for us. It became half of a sausage sandwich in a bun with mustard and chopped onions and some toppings made from seasoned ground meat. As he developed the recipe, I remembered him talking about throwing a lot of it out into the river. He had a troublesome start with the chili because it would sour on the steam table when flour was added for thickening. The hot dog was always "a half," no matter what anybody says. It is not easy to cut an eleven inch sausage in half the long way. It would be much easier if they were portioned controlled, but they come in a natural casing. Sausage is a natural product and everything has to be well monitored to see that quality is maintained. The hot dog began as a half and my father was afraid to change it. That is why, to this day, it is a hand cut sausage.

### **Balancing School and Work**

When I was in the fourth or fifth grade, my friends could only be my friends if they would help me with my work. If they could come after school and help peel potatoes, then they were my friends. I remember turning solid white from potato starch. The peelers would flick potato starch back at us and our clothes became all hard and white. We were given a penny each per potato and we did bags and bags of them for the restaurant. That was my job! That was just the way things worked. We



had to do it. My older brother did the same thing. He had to scrub the entire restaurant every morning before he went to Central Catholic High School. He would get up every day at about four or five o'clock in the morning to scour the whole restaurant. He even missed his study period so that he could get back to the restaurant. He had to come back to work.

When I started high school, I had the same schedule. Nobody even asked me—they just assigned it to me. I did go to the University of Toledo. I wanted to go to Ohio State, and someone (whom I could hit to this day) told my parents, “Oh, girls get pregnant when they go to school out of town.” Even though girls get pregnant when they stay in town too, I wasn’t allowed to go to Ohio State. Although, in the end, The University of Toledo was just fine. Tony, who is sixteen years younger than me, also had an atypical high school experience because of the restaurant. When he played basketball, he had to work right after practice. He lived the life of a forty-five year old, even though he was only fifteen.

This schedule has continued throughout my life. On the day my son Robin was born, I rolled stuffed cabbage until three hours before his birth. I just did what I had to do—work. Nobody had to ask, I just did it.

When I got a divorce, my hours were very erratic. I worked nights so Robin didn’t really have much of a family life. I tried to hire a baby-sitter, but I didn’t like the person, so I moved Robin to my parents’ house by the restaurant. We did manage to have dinners together. I was happy then that Robin was in a family scene and I was working right next door.

## **The Building**

Dad rented 1902 Front Street, but he wanted to expand. That building was much bigger, but much older. It was a terrible building and it still is for that matter. It is in a continuous state of repair. The original place that he opened had one room. Within one year, he added another room; he kept expanding. Around 1945, he bought the house next door. He cut off the living room. The front yard disappeared as the restaurant grew. Then, he bought the tailor shop next door. Finally, he incorporated all three buildings into one. We are always looking to get more room—shoot something out or blow it up or add on sideways.

We also added the first upper-level dining room which faces the bandstand. I had an apartment behind the restaurant. One day, Robin asked me if he could cut a whole in my bathroom in order to install an automatic coin changer for the restaurant's game room. I said, "I don't care what you do." At that point, however, I had spent \$50,000 on that apartment. I was very proud of it and considered it my permanent home. I had real plaster, painted floral ceilings, a tin ceiling in my kitchen and a gorgeous bedroom with a fireplace. I was only able to enjoy it the way I had it for five years until the hole was cut in the bathroom in 1980. After that, I moved out within two months.

The game room had always been there. We originally used it as a beer bottle storage room. As soon as it wasn't mandatory to recycle bottles and send them back, we added the game room. Recently, we have converted it into a gift shop. The upper-level dining room to the north was just another room. I believe that had been part of the tailor shop at one time.

## **Music**

This is a blue collar neighborhood and a heavy work area, so a good deal of our lunch business are workers on short lunch periods from the factories. We always have to have snappy service and hot food. I remember during the weekends, when we had music, the whole tone would change. There were families or women with fur coats but there would be people wearing jeans sitting right next to them. There was always a great mix of people coming in. We have had music in the restaurant since 1935. My father had a gypsy band, and we also had Hungarian bands like Joe Szegedi and Del Osterman, Lee Sutter, Hershey Holt, and, finally, the Cakewalkin' Jass Band. They have played here for over 25 years. Tony and I found them and their presence ushered in a big change.

## **The Next Generation**

When Dad became ill, in 1962, I took over. If I had a problem, I could always call home and ask him about it. We never thought it was a life-threatening illness and I thought he would always be there to answer the questions. When he died in 1963, I was shocked.

The day he died, I didn't know what was in store for me. I had been sheltered and I never had to really face reality. The hardest thing I had to do was to lock the doors to close the restaurant. I had never learned how to close up, I only knew how to stay

open. At that time, women were not in positions of control and we had all male employees. After I officially took over in 1963, I was working long hours and would leave notes for the day shift. I always wrote in pencil things that needed to be done eventually and would write in bold things that were important or things that I didn't like.

One day, someone gave me a "Sharpie" pen which wrote very darkly. The next day, the entire day shift walked out because it looked like I was angry due to the dark writing. I decided then, that nobody was going to make me close down. I was standing there and saw that they had set up the steam table before they walked out. It was about 9:30 a.m. I was stunned and didn't know what to do. I knew I couldn't make everything by myself, so I thought I'd let the customers come behind the counter and make their own sandwiches. I couldn't decide whether to charge half-price or just give out the food for free that day. The workers came back at 11:30 A.M. That was an important lesson in my life. It was unfortunate that such a misunderstanding took place all because of a pen. I'm glad we don't use those thick Sharpies today.

### **The Tiffany Lamps and the Cakewalkin' Jass Band**

My teenage brother and I started to buy the lamps after my father died. We would sit, after work, in the quiet and talk about what we were going to do. During one of these nighttime discussions, I remember we decided that we had to raise the price of our hot dogs from twenty-five to thirty cents. While we were painting the new price white on a black background, the letters turned red and I thought, "That's Dad talking to us." He also said that it did not require intelligence to raise prices, it took more to keep them in line and try to cut other costs.

While having our nighttime talks, we would discuss our advertising program. We had some really silly ads at the time. We used antique ads about medicinal claims until finally someone in the city stopped us because we were claiming that chili could heal almost anything. It was then we realized we both loved Tiffany lamps. We went on an antique hunt in 1964. That became our hobby, shopping for lamps.

After the lunch crowd dispersed, I would travel as far as I could in search of the lamps. Regardless of where either my brother or I would shop, we had to be back in time to close the restaurant by 2:30 A.M. In those days, employees couldn't close up for the owners. We had to count the registers ourselves. Once, I even went as far as



Pittsburgh in search of a lamp. We had made up our minds that if we had to spend most of our time inside the restaurant, we better like the atmosphere!

Almost simultaneously, we hired a Dixieland jazz band because we both loved jazz music and I couldn't convert our regular band over to jazz. They wouldn't tolerate the thought and so they walked out on me. Those were emotional times. I still get a little nervous thinking about them. I read in a labor union newspaper that there were jazz bands playing at Jermain Park on Sundays and I went out to hear them. They canceled due to the weather, so I got in touch with the leader. Without auditioning them, we hired them for the weekend. It was the Cakewalkin' Jass Band. Ray Heitger came over to talk to us and he brought some tapes along. When they played that first weekend, Tony and I stood at the end of the bar, worrying about whether we could afford to pay a seven piece jazz band. We also wondered whether our customers would like them. The first night, the applause was thunderous. After they played, the only question that remained was how to keep them without raising prices. It all worked out.

### **Celebrity Customers**

The weekend business was always a mix of different types of people. I remember, one day, Governor Lausche came in. My father was very impressed. Another time, during lunch in 1968, as I waited on someone, Tony asked me if I knew who I was waiting on. I said, "No. Who?" He told me it was Hans Conreid. I said, "Are you crazy? What would he be doing here?" We circled around and peered at him from the other room. It turned out that it was him. Apparently, he had been staying at the Hillcrest Hotel and had gotten lonesome, so he walked over. When celebrities are on the road, they are not necessarily surrounded by an entourage all of the time. People didn't walk in those days, and I couldn't believe that he was told to walk here. We drove him back to the hotel and he invited us to the theater that night. That was Easter weekend, so I brought him a basket of Hungarian cakes and wine. I still correspond with his wife. He was such a warm, loving person to us that I realized stars are only human too. (When Burt Reynolds came in 1972, I hoped maybe he was lonesome too!)

There was a wonderful theater in Toledo at that time and they had a season of twelve major productions. I sent an open invitation to the stars and their guests. The first time I did this, it wound up involving one hundred and fifty people. I had to empty the restaurant at 9:00 so that the seats would be available at 11:00 for the stars. At one point, I thought Tony was going to kill me for that stunt. After a time, I could



look upon the stage and count 50 or 60 cast members and I would almost want to die because I knew everyone would come, both cast and crew.

Zsa Zsa Gabor came in 1972. Joel Gray was here when he was in "1776," and there were well over 150 people in his private party. They had a huge cake with an actual reproduction of the show's program on it. Joel Gray wanted all the cast names on the cake. That was a tricky one.

On June 25, 1972, at 10:30 P.M., Burt Reynolds came in. He asked me if I wanted him to go on our stage. I did but I didn't know what else he could do besides acting. He put on a hog calling contest! It was an absolute riot. Then, out of the blue, he did this snake dance and after his second twirl through the restaurant, he hugged me and said, "Nancy, save me!" I thought, "Great. This is what I was born for. I know I have a purpose in life."

That was the beginning of our tradition of inviting show people. After these events, everyone brought famous people here, including presidential candidates. It became the thing to do, yet I was unaware of this until a member of a campaign staff asked me if his candidate could come in and sign a hot dog bun. I thought that was pretty neat. In one night, we had Senator Frank Church, Governor Jimmy Carter and Representative Udall, all of whom were running for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. I couldn't get the old campaign signs down fast enough before I had to post the new ones for the next candidate's arrival.

Governor Carter and Senator Church wanted to buy everyone a beer, but I said, "They won't even know where it came from. Why don't I get baby bottles of champagne and put your campaign buttons on them tied with red, white and blue ribbons?" All the customers took home nice souvenirs that night.

## **M\*A\*S\*H**

M\*A\*S\*H was aired on television, initially, during the 70s. The theatrical productions really didn't have anything to do with our M\*A\*S\*H connection. They had an episode of the program called "The Interviewer." It was the only time on the show that they had no written script. They had the cast members relate their actual childhood memories and Jamie Farr, who played "Max Klinger," chose Tony Packo's. He could have chosen anything, but he picked us. The show was supposed to take place in Korea. They were being interviewed in Korea about their memories

of home. I never knew it was going to happen. When it aired, the phone started ringing and everybody I knew in the world called me.

Our first mention on the M\*A\*S\*H show was on Feb. 24, 1976, and we were in seven shows until Feb. 28, 1983. I would know when we were going to be in a show because they would build a replica of the restaurant and I had to send them all sorts of items pertaining to Tony Packo's. They would always call at four or five o'clock in the afternoon and they needed them on their desks in the morning. The first time, they needed color photos of the interior and exterior of the restaurant. I guess God was with me, because somebody had just taken two rolls of film to be used in Chicago and it was still on a desk in Toledo, so I was able to get it to them. That was good fortune. When an opportunity arrives, you just ask them how high they want you to jump.

Another time, I learned I was to be on a show with Robin Leach at four in the afternoon. I said to myself, "You can't do this show without some products being in his hands—He's got to taste the food." I had it sent to him at 5:00 P.M. and it was on its way to their offices in New York to be there the next morning. Then, at 7:00 P.M. that night, they decided they wanted Leech to sign a hot dog bun. Sending the bun was a little trickier because I had a hard time finding an open Federal Express office. When I found one, I begged them to stay open a half-hour longer for me. Luckily, they did.

## **The Grocery Business**

September of 1980 is when we first went into the grocery business. The first things to be packaged were the pickles. I remember my line to Tony, "I don't know who is going to want your dumb pickles. Let's get the hot dog sauce canned." It was my father's recipe. Tony won because the hot dog sauce took quite a bit longer to get into production. There is a factory in Saint Joe, Indiana that does the pickles and the sauce have to be federally inspected using special machinery in Louisville, Kentucky. The tomato products are made at Hirzel Canning Company. I would have kept the hot dog sauce here, but it contains 85% beef content and that has to be federally inspected and the local plant does not qualify.

In our company, everyone mixes duties. I am the secretary, but we don't get hung up on titles; we just do our jobs. The difficulty is when we have business cards made up. We are working on some more food products. I wish Tony could find a way to

freeze his noodles because he makes the best dumplings with cabbage, and the best chicken paprikash.

## **Best Memory**

I always said that I would never force my son Robin to go into this business. There is nothing worse than being in the restaurant business if you don't like it. There is no escape from it; you always take your problems home. One isolated incident can break a person's spirit for a week and it is unfortunate that happens because so many positive things happen too. There are so many compliments and truly memorable things, but it seems like at night, you only take home the bad memories, and I never wanted to do that to Robin.

My younger brother, Tony, was born into it. He loved it. When he was young, he even had a little counter where he had set up a little beer box and had an apron tied around him. The earliest pictures that I have of him show him selling things. I don't think Tony had much of a choice; the business was programmed into him. On the other hand, Robin was a mechanical wizard. We sent him to school to study mechanical engineering, but he didn't care for it. The day I knew that he was hooked on the business was when he was supposed to go away for the weekend and he said, "I can't leave here. I am going to miss something." I knew then he was hooked. He wanted to be a part of it. I didn't force it on him. Sure, I really wanted him in the business, but it was his choice. That was my greatest moment. Because I was able to pass on something to him, I knew my life had a reason.

## **The House**

I have never lived more than a half of a block from the restaurant. I was born on Burr Street, where we lived before moving to Consaul Street. Then, in 1950, we moved one half block to where I live now, 1925 Consaul Street. Dad said he was not going to drive an hour each day across town only to kill himself on the highway. So, they purchased three lots close to the restaurant. One of the houses on the lot was moved over to Valentine Street and the other was demolished. There are many reasons why my parents and I live so close to our work. There are the demands of the restaurant, etc.

I put on a major addition to the house when I added a bedroom. When I made the addition, Robin said, "You might as well flush money down the toilet for what you are doing." He wanted the house for the business. But it is my life. The interesting



thing was that right after the addition was finished, Tony III became ill. When I would come home from work, he had overtaken my bedroom. Then, the following month, Robin burned his leg really badly and he would stay there each day when I went to work. I said, "What is this, a hospital recovery room?" Robin said, "This is a good place to heal, because I am sort of still at work."

## **Regrets**

It was a decision I didn't make. I wasn't involved when they decided to open a second restaurant. I did not want it under any circumstances. I wished they would have made a drive-thru carry-out instead of a sit down restaurant. They did it without me. They announced it to me in the bookkeeper's office. They emptied the office and then gave me the news. I proceeded to scream for the next two hours: "Why would you want more of this? How can you even think of having more of this?" I wanted to get into the grocery stores and let somebody else sell it. It is a good feeling to drive by the grocery store at midnight in another city and find out they are selling your stuff that you don't have to touch anymore. I have made mistakes, but mistakes are only real mistakes if they are not learned from.

## **Comforting Noises**

My mother didn't work in the restaurant after Tony was born but she still ran it with an iron fist. Her life line to the place was to have several pots of coffee delivered to her house every two hours. I know she didn't drink that much. We brought her many coffee makers, but she threw them all out. She didn't want a coffee maker. She said, "I don't like the coffee it makes. I like the restaurant coffee." What she really liked was to have whoever delivered the coffee tell her what was happening in the restaurant. That way she was always kept informed. She knew more than I did about the place. That was her hotline. She also had speakers hooked up to the restaurant so she could hear the jazz band; but she could also hear the crowd and the dishes clinking. I am just like her. I never minded the noises because when I would hear the dishwasher banging and the doors closing and dishes clanking, I knew we were busy. As long as there is noise, there is success.

Once, a friend was having her apartment done. I said, "You don't have to go to a motel. Stay here. I'm going out of town." I forgot to mention that it is impossible to go to sleep until 2:00 A.M. She got jolted out of bed at 9:00 at night by the band. She never knew what hit her. She checked out of here and went to a motel.



## **The Packo Family Mold**

My father and I were partners in crime. I remember his Cadillac. We got it up to one hundred and twenty miles per hour. We peeled off about half of the rubber on the tires and swore to never tell my mother. My granddaughter and I have storytelling time. I tell her these family stories and she laughs her head off. I am not sure she understands them all, but she gets so tickled about them.

We make our own stories too. I was taking Brittany to receive an award in a national pageant. She was going to get the top award. They had a triathlon outside the hotel where we were staying. There were over a thousand people there and I couldn't get the car out of the parking lot. The police told me to pull back into the lot. I said, "If you don't get these people out of my way, I will drive over them." I must have used a cuss word or two and the policewoman said, "If you swear again, I'm throwing you in jail." I said, "Watch my lips, get me the \*&#% out of here!" As I mouthed the words, the police lady looked so stunned, she got me out. About three hours later, I remembered that Brittany was listening to the encounter. I said, "I didn't even realize what I had said to the policewoman. I was just frantic." Brittany said, "I heard you grandma. You said, 'Watch my lips.'"

My granddaughter Brittany is straight out of the family mold. She is an absolute tiger just like my mother. I am leaving my legacy with her. I don't ever want her to tell a fellow, "Just give me something simple please." That's her first lesson, and the second is to stick up for herself. She has got spitfire in her soul and she is only five and a half. She loves a box I have which we call "Gypsy Party." It contains every bit of jewelry, lace, and fringe that I ever accumulated from my grandmother. It all has been handed down through the years and went into the "Gypsy Party" box. I was going to have a big Gypsy party someday but she found that box and one would have thought it was lined with gold. The box was more than enough for her. She said, "Oh Grandma! It is beautiful." I said, "I know you are a true Hungarian, because you have Gypsy in your soul, honey."

I am so thankful to have such a dedicated, wonderful family. My brother Tony is so much like my father. He works with the same fervor and dedication that Dad did. His wife, Linda, is the creative genius behind our advertising and food company sales. My son, Robin, is the driving force that will take Tony Packo's into the 21st century. He strives to make it among the best run restaurants in the world. He tackles projects that to me seemed impossible. He makes them happen. His wife, Terrie, has a marketing talent that always makes everything she touches more

beautiful than I could have ever dreamed. But the best may be yet to come with Tony III and Brittany. I am truly blessed!

## **The Future**

People are trying to talk me into Sun City. They want me to make a gift shop out of the house. I think not. There was a day when Tony probably would have liked to cook chili in my swimming pool, but that was never going to happen either. They also said my lot would make a good parking lot. I don't really care what they do when I'm gone. I don't believe I could go to Sun City. I wouldn't feel normal. I couldn't stand a life that is quiet and in solitude. I would be bonkers in no time at all. I don't even vacation to quiet places. I can't stand it! I went to China, Russia and everywhere else so I could be among the first Americans they would allow in to visit. I have been all over the world. Once, I did go to an island setting for a week. It was the worst trip I ever took. If they don't sell pickles in heaven, I don't want to go. I better be doing something up there that I know how to do. I don't want to just fly around!

*Lillian Kertz Keil*

## Lillian (Kertz) Keil

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*Interviewed by Joyce Hutchison*

**M**y Dad, Joseph Kertz, was born May 14, 1882 in Csolto (now Csoltovo), Austria-Hungary. My mother, Rosalie Saliga, was born on June 10th, 1888, in Tornalja (now Safariko), Austria-Hungary which is now part of Slovakia. My parents were married in September, 1905. My dad left my mom during the honeymoon and went to America. He sent for her in 1907. My brother was born three years later. Then, in 1917, I was born. My family also adopted a little girl in 1926, when she was one year old. My parents also had a son, John and a daughter, Mary, in between our births, who died as infants. My father died in 1946 and my mother died in 1973. My brother, Joseph, died in 1962 at the age of fifty-one. My father was employed at the Toledo Furnace, which became United States Steel, located on Front Street, across from Bakewell. He walked to work. My father was a bricklayer. It was my father who relined the furnaces with brick.

### School

I went to kindergarten at Birmingham School, first grade at Holy Rosary School and second through eighth grades at St. Stephen's School. I graduated from St. Stephen's in 1931. I recollect that my mother took me out of St. Stephen's kindergarten. She may have thought that it was too far for me to walk on my own. She couldn't take me because she had to work at a tailor shop. My brother was entering eighth grade and Father Eordogh, who was the pastor at the time, observed that the children had lost much school time due to an epidemic of chicken pox or measles. He decided that they needed to repeat seventh grade. My mother was an independent soul. She said she couldn't afford that, so she enrolled him at Holy Rosary, a Slovak Parish which was out of our school district.

She entered my brother in eighth grade at Holy Rosary where he graduated. She enrolled me in first grade there and then transferred me back to St. Stephen's at the end of the year. Then I went to Waite High School and graduated in 1935. I liked school and was a good student. I was the winner of the spelling bee. In grade school, I played Cinderella in one of our school plays. The nuns really liked to put me in



productions and, for some reason, even though I was a bashful child, they pushed me into performing. It wasn't until I started working that I got over my bashfulness. The first job I had was with salesmen who really teased me. I got over my bashfulness. I ascended through the ranks of a professional women's club. I took their independent development course which helped me develop public speaking skills. I don't think I really got over being shy until I was involved with that organization.

In high school, I shouldn't have listened to my friends who said, "Oh, you don't have to study, you will get by." I probably could have been an 'A' student, but I was influenced by them. They didn't care much for studying. My parents wanted me to go to college, but I was a willful child and I didn't want to go. My brother did go and he wanted me to go too. I had dreams of becoming a private secretary, so I wanted to take the commercial course. My brother realized our parents knew nothing about our school system. Being Hungarian, they didn't understand the American way, so it was my brother who oversaw my education. He convinced my parents that I was choosing a very easy course and should be taking the academic courses. I refused and so he settled on a general course of study. I took typing and dictating. I chose my own electives. With the general courses, I took bookkeeping. At that time bookkeeping was a part of the commercial course, so I was getting my business education. It eliminated the Latin that was compulsory with the other. I advise young people to really study. Children don't want to, but they are missing something if they don't put forth their full effort to study all they can.

## **Work**

I graduated at the age of 18, in June of 1935. By August, I was employed as a bookkeeper at the Central Tea Company. I took the bus to work then but I did walk from downtown quite a few times, especially if I missed the bus. Math was my worst subject, yet I ended up doing taxes and bookkeeping as my life's work. It was a challenge and I liked challenges. It was good. It made me use my brain. My first job at the Central Tea Company had its main office in Detroit. I worked for them for about five years, transferred to Detroit and lived in Detroit, working as an office supervisor. I got married, so then I had to leave that job. I worked for the Corps of Engineers in 1943 but the office closed. I went with my husband to Ames, Iowa where he was inducted into the Navy and sent to Iowa State College. We lived in Ames for about six months and then he was sent to New York City to Consolidated Edison. I worked for Woolworth on Broadway and 42nd Street for roughly four months and then my husband was sent to Norfolk, Virginia. There I worked for the



Department of the Navy at the Naval base. He was shipped out to sea, so I came home. I got a job with the Internal Revenue Service in 1944 and worked there until 1960. After leaving the IRS, I took a year off before I went to work at the Toledo Trust Company which became Trust Corp. in 1983. After that job, I would only work during tax season until I retired in 1986.

## **Childhood**

When I was a child, the country was in the Depression. Whenever I needed a new coat or a new pair of shoes, I had to wait until Christmas. We never received any toys because there just wasn't enough money for them. We appreciated new dresses, coats, shoes and practical things.

There was no "to do" about birthdays. It was just another day. I never had a single birthday party. One July Fourth, an election year, there was a big picnic in Collins Park with the politicians. I remember the kids didn't listen to the speeches. They were running around eating free hot dogs and ice cream. The early politicians took advantage of the occasion. They had sack races and different games. Then, of course, they would award prizes to the winners. At picnics, we ate breaded chicken. There would be sausage, not hamburgers, because that is not Hungarian. On Memorial Day, when I was young, there would not be school.

I had time to play; I loved to read. I would get lost in books. When my mother would call me to come wash the dishes, I would never hear her. I loved reading! I remember the library being on the corner of Bogar and Genesee. The school aged children would go there after school or after supper to do their homework because the library had all of the reference books. And, of course, everybody went there. I would always stop there after school and get books and read. I was very happy when the new library was built on Paine Avenue because it was closer to my home. I would say I went there every day. It had the reference books that I needed to do my homework. Also, it was a gathering place for the young people even though we were not allowed to speak inside the library at that time. It was "SHHHH!" It seems so different now because I hear loud voices when I go to the library. I only regret that I don't have time to read now. If I do, I stay up all night to finish the book! I like to read books by Danielle Steele and Sidney Sheldon.

## Marriage

I met my husband Vernon in 1937 at the Central Tea Company. He pursued me until I said, "yes." It ended in divorce after twenty-two years of marriage. We had no children. While being employed at the Tea Company, he would come in the office and ask me for dates. I kept saying, "no." I guess he wasn't my type. There were only two men working there in the stock room. One was Mickey and the other was Vern. My mother was very interested in these young men. She would ask me, "Which one do you prefer?" I said, "Well, if any, I prefer Vern." So, I finally agreed to a date in the spring of 1938.

It happened to be a fishing date and the place where we went fishing was right across the harbor from where our summer home is now located. I never dreamt then that I would wind up living across the way from where I had my first date. We went with his grandparents. They are the ones who taught me to fish. Once I started catching fish, I became hooked. His grandmother used to rent a small cottage over there because she was very interested in fishing. The family had gathered, they had come down for the entire weekend. She was fixing the fish we caught for supper and I told her that I didn't like fish. She said, "Well, I will fix it and you try it and if you don't like it, I will fry you some pork chops." If I hadn't seen her fix the fish, I would have sworn it was chicken. It didn't taste fishy. If caught and prepared the same day, it makes a difference.

We dated for a couple of years. At the wedding, I had three bridesmaids. I had my best friend from Waite High School as my maid of honor and I had my sister and Vern's sister as attendants. We went to shows and dancing different places. He didn't care much for dancing.

We had an apartment on Bancroft Street. Then, he was called to service in Iowa where he told me he wanted to get me a job so that I wouldn't be following him from Army camp to Army camp. Instead, he joined the Navy. Then, I guess he changed his mind because he had me quit my job with the Corps of Engineers to be with him. But I would only see him on weekends because he couldn't get leave. I had a small apartment. I learned how to knit from my neighbor. I took walks; I rode the bus to Des Moines, Iowa. I could have gotten a job on the base in the cafeteria. They offered it to me, but the pay was so small, I thought I would just take a rest after working all those years.

## **Traditions**

I remember being carried to St. Stephen's Church which was packed lots of times with standing room only, the entire length of the church. Today, there are hardly any people in church. There are a lot of empty places in the pews.

Naturally, when the neighbors would die, we would attend their funerals. I would estimate there were one hundred funeral pictures taken, because that was a tradition. Funeral photos would be taken so they could be sent back to relatives remaining in Europe to verify that the deceased had a nice funeral. The casket was open at the front of the church. The people who attended the funeral stood behind the casket and the photographer would take the picture.

We always had a St. Stephen's picnic in August, which is now the Birmingham Ethnic Festival. It was an outdoor dance. I remember the good times we had as children at these picnics. My family participated in them together.

When I was a child, there was always Hungarian dancing at the church activities. My mother made my costume. Now, we do have the Magyar Dancers which was initiated the year that I was president of the Hungarian Club. The Hungarian Club was started by those who defected in 1956 from Hungary. One couple who defected lived four houses down from us. In the summertime, they held picnics in their backyard, where we could see them. Eventually, that group decided to form a club. Louis and Mary Bango and Mr. and Mrs. William Dobo are two of those who started the club. It was my idea to start the dance group and it is still continued. We still practice quite a few traditions, but after Father Hernady retires in June, we will have to wait and see whether they are still practiced.

## **Activities**

I belong to the Oregon Business and Professional Women's Club, Sama Gama, the St. Stephen's Rosary Altar Society, and the Hungarian Club. My friends are from the quilting group, The Maumee Bay Country Quilters' Guild. The very first quilt we made was brought to my house and seven other women showed up on Friday nights to work on the quilt. I have designed three quilts for St. Stephen's and am currently working on a new one. We formed a home spun needle-threaders' group which meets every Thursday night. We quilt a quilt for each one of us. We drew names and my quilt was finished on my birthday in 1993. I have entered that quilt into the Sauder's Quilt Show that opens this month.



## **Friends**

I have one special friend. We worked together. She was a secretary at the Trust Corp. She comes into town on Wednesdays for her hair appointment. We get to talking and our feet just lead us automatically to the Golden Lily which is a Chinese restaurant. We never have to ask each other where we are going. That is where we go to lunch. We met in 1962 when I went to work at the Trust. Elna Damschroder is a friend I can tell my troubles to. She commiserates with me. Friends are those who allow you to unburden yourself. I try to reciprocate; if friends come to me with problems, I try to help. Friends are those who are there for you.

## **Meals**

I remember the breaded veal with tomato sauce that my mother made. She also made chicken paprikash, stuffed cabbage and roast pork with the dressing. I still can't make the dressing as well as my mother did. I try, but I just can't get it. She never wanted me in the kitchen, even as a child. I would ask to help but she would send me to help out my father. Helping out Dad is coming in handy because now I know all the tools. I know what to do if something needs fixed in the house. The weekday meal would be soup, followed by meat from the soup with vegetables and potatoes. On Sundays, we had breaded chicken or veal with tomato sauce and stuffed cabbage. The Hungarians really stuff it with ground pork and mix it with rice or barley. My mother always made it with barley because she said pork had to be cooked for a long time and that the rice would get mushy, but barley would stay whole.

## **Pets and Hobbies**

I had a dog, but she died four years ago. I do have two cats. I have just a few tomato and pepper plants. I try to grow some Hungarian peppers for seasoning Hungarian food. Quilting is my main hobby, but I also embroider. I teach embroidery at St. Stephen's.

## **Holidays and Sundays**

When we were young, we went to visit my godmother. It seemed like it was far away, but she lived on Wheeling near Front Street. The godparents would either come to our house or we would go to visit them on Sundays. Sometimes we would visit the relatives on Sunday afternoons. We played cards. My dad had some Hungarian cards and he taught me how to play. I don't remember how anymore. We



never went on vacations. There was a close friend of the family who lived in Swanton, which seemed so far away. My parents always took me to visit out there because I was a very skinny child. They wanted me to breathe in that fresh, county air. They wanted to fatten me up but I never put on weight until I was forty years old.

### **Last Thoughts**

I think it is vital to treat everyone respectfully. I was taught to respect my elders. In my life, I've held many positions and I can honestly advise those who do not enjoy their jobs to leave them. Life is too short to be unhappy. If a person is not happy with a particular job, they should quit and find something else.

Birmingham was such a wonderful place to live when I was a child. But things change. We were neighborly. We helped one another. Things have changed. I guess nothing stays the same.



# William Kertesz

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*Interviewed by Randy Nissen*

I went to St. Stephen's school, I graduated in 1939. Nuns, priests, the monsignors, it was just like a big family. Hungarian wasn't the language of the school, we were all taught in English, but we did have a class in Hungarian while in the third or fourth grade. We learned little songs, sayings and the history of Hungary. We spoke mostly Hungarian at home, and my dad was very proud of his English. He learned to read and write English, but we were still encouraged to speak Hungarian at home.

School was filled with warm memories. I thought I was poor until I saw other children at school wearing raggedy clothes. Being poor didn't seem to bother us. We were just a good group. I remember that it was not unlikely to have forty children in one class. Discipline was tight. If a student failed to complete homework, that student could expect a crack on his/her hand with a ruler. It happened more than once a month, and we used to laugh about it because it really didn't hurt us that much at all. One time after school, one of us scraped the varnish off a yard stick and we rubbed garlic into it. It worked. One of the nuns went to swat a child who hadn't done his homework, and the yard stick broke in two. She never did catch on.

## **School Vacations**

School vacations were wonderful. We would seek out adventure. In my younger days, we used to go out to the Old Pit where Edison now dumps their "fly ash" and we used to look at all kinds of wild life: the ducks, the muskrats and geese, the rabbits and the pheasants; and we made our own bows and arrows. We were going to be big game hunters! We used to dig caves and while we played inside them, we would eat baked potatoes. We had fun. Kids seem to enjoy getting into trouble these days. When I meet a child who has straight 'A's,' or some good student like this, I am overjoyed because this is a rare person.

"Stick to it and learn as much as you can," I tell my grandchildren. I encourage them. I have a picture of my grandson taken after he had written his name out on a piece of paper. It is in a frame. I am going to save it for him when he grows up. He was so proud of that and I encouraged him by saying, "I knew you could do it." He

is a smart child; as smart as a whip and I encourage him to get all the knowledge he can, because society is so competitive now. It seems like a race for everything.

## **School Escapades**

How did we get in trouble? I have never told anyone this story before. After school there were about three or four of us who stayed to sweep the floor, empty waste baskets, clean the blackboards, etc., and I was dusting the teacher's desk. I happened to notice an open drawer and I looked in there and there were four water pistols. We thought we would take them home for the night and have fun. I remember squirting my young sister. In return, she threw paper wads at me and my mother said, "Put that gun down or I am going to smash it." Of course, I didn't put it down and I kept squirting her and, once, I squirted my mother. That was about enough. She took the gun away from me and put it on the floor and smashed it. She broke it into smithereens. In the morning, before the teacher came in, I straightened it out the best I could and put it back in her desk. She asked me a lot of questions. I gave myself away because I started to sweat and turn red. After a few more questions, the nun knew that I stole the pistol, so I had to go see Monsignor. I got a couple of whacks with his rubber hose. It didn't hurt. It wounded my pride more than anything, but that was the only time I ever had to "go to see Monsignor."

## **Courtship**

She was from the North End. Our introduction was at the old Coliseum on Summit St. and New York Ave. I knew of her before this meeting, but after we were introduced formally, then we started going together. My wife and I were introduced by a mutual friend and we seemed to "hit it off." We went roller skating together, enjoyed movies, and just loved being together. Everyone went to movies downtown, usually to the Paramount, Tivoli, Lowes or the Valentine and then would stop in at the Purple Cow afterwards. It was a restaurant right there on St. Clair where the Ohio Citizens Bank is located (now the National City Bank). People would either visit those places or would go to Kewpies or other similar establishments. When "going out," it was not appropriate to wear blue jeans. So, I would usually wear slacks with a light sweater. I dressed casually, yet I did try to look nice. The men would only wear neckties when attending weddings or funerals.

## **Marriage**

We got married in St. Stephen's Rectory because my wife was Lutheran. Later, she took instructions to be Catholic. Father Reinick was supposed to marry us, but he got called away suddenly and Monsignor Eordogh married us. We thought that it was a very nice wedding. We had a big party at my parent's house and invited as many relatives as would fit into the house comfortably. After that, we honeymooned in the southern part of Ohio and Kentucky and into Tennessee.



When we first married we lived on Caledonia Street. The house was a little small, and I really didn't want to buy in the neighborhood. When I put a bid in for the house, I offered such a ridiculously low price that I felt sure that I was going to be turned down. About a month later, a real estate person informed me that the bid was accepted! I said to my wife, "What are we going to do, they accepted our bid?" She said, "Let's move into the house, it will be cheaper than rent and we could fix it up and sell it and get another house when the opportunity presents itself," which it did.

When the home in which we currently live came up for sale, it was one of the nicest homes in Birmingham. I put a bid in on the house, and so did a few other people, but they decided to sell it to me because I was a friend of the family. My bid was for a few thousand dollars less than others too, so it was a great deal. The house was built in 1937. When I was a boy living across the alley, I watched gigantic draft horses, digging the basement with huge scoops. I used to watch horses pull the scoop right out like it was child's play. There were a few times that I was late to school because I was watching those horses. Who would have thought that years later I would be moving into that house? It is still a nice house because it is built rock solid. I like it, but the neighborhood has changed and I am getting a little apprehensive.

I never wanted to live in a house that had homes built closely on either side of it. Here, I have an alley and I own the vacant lot next to me. I have some room. One of my hobbies is feeding birds and I have a hawk who visits here every winter for meat. I know a hawk would not fly down to visit in instances where houses are situated closely together. I put out meat everyday for him and he comes down to eat it. Another hobby is my wife's garden. She used to garden tomatoes and cucumbers, but she got tired of that and now she likes roses, so it's all full of roses.

### **Church at St. Stephen's**

We go to 8:30 Mass every Sunday at St. Stephen's. We sit in a special place, about eight rows from the back. Mary, the baker, and a few other friends always seem to congregate in one spot before Mass, and we gossip a bit. It is kind of peaceful for us to go to church. Where else but in a church can a woman feel comfortable leaving her purse unguarded while she goes to communion? Leaving her purse unattended from a distance of fifty or sixty feet is certainly not something that would happen in a shopping center or any other public place. It's relaxing to know the people at Church can be trusted.

I was an altar boy for many years, so I had opportunities to go to a lot of baptisms, funerals, and to go with the priests around the neighborhood blessing houses. The priests usually went with one or two altar boys around January blessing houses with a little incense and Holy Water. At the end of the blessing he would write 19—G+M+B then the last two numbers of the date of the year. G+M+B represent the three wise men who came to witness the birth of Jesus Christ. It is still being done.

Church envelopes have spaces marked on them which allow parishioners to indicate whether they would like their homes blessed. I have been to funerals in other churches and other funeral homes, but they seem a little cold, not like a funeral at St. Stephen's. In the old days (1930's or 40's), when funerals were attended by crowds of several hundred, a man would go even if he would lose a day's pay. In those days, persons were buried on the third day after they died. I remember when bodies were brought home from the war and we would be asked, as veterans of the VFW, to attend the funeral. This was to honor our war heroes that were being brought back. At that time, I worked at the American Ship Building Company, and they would give us half a day's pay to go to a funeral.

I am a history buff. I like to read, especially naval warfare about W.W.II. I lost a few friends during the war and as soon as I pick up a book, I think of Scotty Fejes, Andy Gribo, Mate, and a few others. They were friends of mine. We were in the same grade; however, we attended different schools. Some went to Birmingham School, like Scotty Fejes. He was a few years older than the rest of our friends, but he was sort of our football coach when we played little scrub teams on the Birmingham School lots.

## **Holidays**

It seemed like the neighborhood used any excuse to have a festival. There were the Greek Festivals and the May Festivals. Just about every time one turned around, there was some kind of festival going on. This neighborhood was one big, happy family. It seems to me that there was a St. Stephen's Day. I know if St. Stephen's Day fell on a weekday, we were given a day off from school. We were also given off school for the Monsignor's birthday or anniversary. We got half-days off many times. The May Festival was a religious celebration. It honored our Lady, Queen of May. I remember Christmas, the preparation, the baking, the cooking, the tree, the gifts, the church. It was both a fun time as well as a spiritual one. In those days it was stressed that Christmas was the birthday of Christ. Today, it is so commercialized, children really don't know the meaning of Christmas anymore. In the past, prior to Christmas was a time to cut back on sweets and meals so as not to over indulge in the good Hungarian food. It was a time of toning down everything.

I remember Christmas Day. I got erector sets, tinker toys, and clothes. If I got a tinker toy set, that is all I would be given. The next year, I would get an erector set. My parents always made sacrifices to buy us at least a little something. Some birthdays were big occasions, but for the most part, a birthday was just another day. Maybe Mom would bake a cake or something special to eat. Or, we would be given a small gift or two, but that was it. I remember going to a few birthday parties for other kids, but it was all low key. July 4th was really something; everybody had fireworks. We had big fire crackers. They were set off both the week before and after the Fourth of July and our parents would go "nuts," but we had fun. I do remember my dad saying about Labor Day, "Why do you think you call it labor day?"

It is a day to catch up on work around the house!" That is what we did. We painted a little and handled some repairing here and there. I helped Dad quite a bit and he was happy.

## **The Work Force**

I told my parents I wanted to quit school in my junior year because it seemed like everyone was going out into the work force—that was where the money was. College was something for the very rich people. I wanted to get out into the work force badly. I finally convinced them that I wanted to quit and my mother signed the papers. One of my first jobs was at Save Electric. I think it was the most dangerous job in the place, mixing hydrofluoric acid to frost the inside of bulbs. I was dressed in rubber aprons, masks, and rubber gloves. I made fifty-six cents an hour. At the time that was considered good money. The place was at the corner of Front Street and Main Street. It is where the BEC Laboratories are now. I was about 17. After Save Electric, I went to work at the American Ship Building Company and my first job was cleaning out bilges on the "Mackinaw," and I said, "To heck with this. I want to do something, I want to be somebody around here." At that time my brother was a supervisor and I asked him if he could put me in welding school. He said, "certainly." He put me in welding school with quite a few other people and I learned how to weld fairly well. It was necessary to pass five tests: flat, vertical, overhead, pipe, and shell plate. If all five were passed, a number five badge was awarded. I was up to number three: flat, vertical, and overhead. Then I was given my draft notice. I was told to report to some of the officers of the shipyard. They wanted to get me a deferment. I said, "No way. I am going to win this war." No amount of talking could change my mind, so I was drafted in December of 1943.

## **World War II**

I knew with my background at the shipyard (I ran the boat once in a while) that I could get into the Navy. So, I selected them as my number one choice. My mother cried. She didn't want me to go because my brother Joe was already in the service. After I was done with my physical, they sent me into this room where I was grilled by a Marine General and a Colonel. I was accepted into the Navy. About a week or so later, I was on my way to boot camp. This was like opening the world to me. Going to school opened doors, but this was like opening the door to the world. This was the great adventure! This was it! I was really anxious to go.

I was in the amphibious forces on the *U.S.S. Starlight* and the *U.S.S. Cape Johnson*. I participated in the invasions of Guam, Leyte, Luzon and, the worst of all, Okinawa. In those two and a half to three years that I was in the service, I saw an awful lot of combat and a great many scenes that made me change my mind about "the big adventure." Even now, in the fall, when I see leaves falling down, I think about that song, "The Falling Leaves." I saw Japanese planes falling out of the sky. I can still see it happening any place I looked on the horizon. They looked just like leaves



falling down. They were Kamikaze dives. I remember ships getting hit and bodies flying.

When looking back at it fifty years later, I know we gained something, but I always wonder, "What did we really gain?" I never had seen so many dead bodies in my life and even to this day, I keep asking, "For what?" I hate to think about one nation aggressing another nation and for what, to gain more land? It seems that somehow they should concentrate on their own lands and try to improve their own lands instead of bullying someone else's—as the Russians did when they took over Hungary.

## **Life After the War**

After the war, I went back to work at the shipyard and during the wintertime there was a lot of work there. The boats were tied up for the winter to be repaired, and when springtime would come around, I would get laid off. So, I would go to work on the railroad just in time for the wheat rush. Then, wintertime would come along, and the shipyard would call me back, so I would bounce back to the shipyard. I loved working at the shipyard. I had passed the test to be a high pressure pipe welder, and I was a number five welder-earning a decent wage. In fact, I still have my 1948 work report upstairs which reads: "You will report to the boiler shop on Monday, your starting wage is \$1.50 per hour." I came home to my wife and said, "Look at this Babe, a buck and a half an hour! We are in the big bucks now-sixty bucks a week!" How times have changed. I bounced around from one job to another and, eventually, I said to myself, "I am getting nowhere fast. I am not building up any seniority. I am not going anywhere." Along came a notice about a test for the fire department.

## **Remembrances of the Fire Department**

My buddy and I went down to the fire department. He missed, but I passed. At the time, I was laid off from the shipyard and the railroad, and I had applied to ship out on the lakes. I lived on Bush Street. They had a man walk over from the fire department at Bush and Erie to tell me to report to my test. That same day, I got a letter from the Hannah Steamship Company to go to work for them on the lakes. And the Highway Patrol called me, and the railroad called me back to work too! All of a sudden, I was flooded with jobs. I said to my wife, "My God, what should I do?" She told me to take the job with the Fire Department because it was steadier and would allow me to be home in the evenings, unlike the other options. I took the fire department and that is where I spent the next 31 years. When I finished fire school, they assigned me to the Number Three Engine House in the North End. I knew that meant we were going to cover Birmingham too. I wondered what it was going to be like going through Birmingham. I wasn't the driver then; I was just the hydrant man on the back end. Every time we would ride into Birmingham, everyone would say, "Hey! There is Bill!" I had a difficult time holding on to the truck with one hand while waving with the other.



I had a few influential people sign my application as a reference, but I don't think it made that much of a difference then. It didn't matter if you were black, white, or otherwise, you were put on the eligibility list. It was a very rewarding job. Who knows how many lives I saved. I don't want to sound like I am bragging, but we enjoyed battling the flames and putting out fires. We felt like we accomplished something. Like the iron worker who drives by a building and says, "I helped build that building," my monument might be a basement or a foundation that was left after a blazing fire.

We had a few close calls. I remember the Maumee Valley Chemical Fire put me in the hospital. I also received a lot of minor injuries like twisted ankles, cuts bruises, and falls. I remember one time, a large bar was on fire on Madison Avenue, and I was up in the attic with an air tank on my back. I didn't know it at the time, but I was working over a storage area. I couldn't see anything in the attic and I tripped on a rafter and fell between the beams. The air tank was wedged between them but wouldn't let me fall all of the way through. I was down to the first floor. One of the firemen, a black fellow by the name of Mac (who was a pretty good sized fellow) picked me up easily and we found our way out together following our hose lines. After the fire was knocked down, I went into that storage area and looked around. I looked up at the hole where my foot came through and right underneath that hole there were iron picket fences standing straight up. If I would have gone through, I would have hit those picket fences, and I probably wouldn't be here now to tell the story! It was a rewarding job and I really liked it.

## **Organizational Involvement**

I am a charter, life member of the local VFW and I also belong to the American Legion. I belong to the DAV (Disabled American Veterans) Chapter 27, the East Toledo Historical Society and The Toledo Hungarian Club. My hobby is local history and, unfortunately, I haven't put the time into it like I want to because of my health condition. I keep busy. I try to keep my mind occupied and I enjoy everything I do.

## **Friends**

We didn't have any special gang. We all had one hangout and mine was Maroda's Bowling Alley, where the St. Stephen's parking lot is now—right across from Nancy Packo's. It was a four or five lane bowling alley. All of us would meet there usually on a weekend. We wouldn't dress fancy. Each of us might wear a nice pair of slacks and a sweater or a short-sleeved shirt. I had a lot of friends. There was Bill Nyeri and Jacobs who now live in Woodville, Ohio. I still see Jacobs occasionally.

## Childhood Memories

I remember the kitchen most of all. It sticks out in my mind because my mother was always in there cooking, and when we sat down for our evening meal, it was like a banquet. We didn't pray before our meal, but once in a while, on a special holiday, like Thanksgiving or Christmas, we would say a little prayer. We were all living at home at the time and there were eleven of us plus a boarder. When we pulled out the table, we would have to put about two or three leaves in it. There was always a huge bowl of soup or maybe a roast. There was always food on the table. Times were tough and I don't know how we managed, but we did. My wife makes soup now and I call my brother over and he gets a tear in his eye because it tastes like Ma used to make. My mother would send me to the store, to Farkas. He was a good butcher. We would buy beef shank for the soup. I would ask Mr. Mike to put in a nice knuckle for a soup bone. He would throw in a big knuckle of bone and would split the marrow for free. Now, at the grocery stores, it costs money for that knuckle. Breaded veal was a specialty. I remember hamburger cooked well done in lard. Then there was the usual stuffed cabbage and sausage, and rice sausage.

Around holidays, my mother would get the laundry basket. It was a huge hamper, and she would line it with white cloth dish towels. She used to fill the baskets with these little Hungarian pastries, but they didn't last long with twelve of us in the house. She was forever cooking and cleaning. Occasionally, I would see her on a couch crocheting. Sometimes, while crocheting, her head would nod and she would take a little nap.

## Embroidering

The strange thing about embroidery and crocheting was that as delicate an art as it seems, my dad, who worked about 47 years at the shipyard as a blacksmith and was built like Charley Atlas, wanted to do something completely opposite so he took up needlework. Can you imagine that, a big guy like this taking up needle work? He made beautiful hook rugs and somebody told him that he ought to enter some of those rugs into the fair. He said, "No. What's an old guy like me doing in a fair?" We convinced him and he went down to the fair. I took him down there and he entered the rugs and on the bottom of each rug he wrote, "Made by S. Kertesz." There are still blue ribbons around this house that he won for those rugs because they were so tightly packed and they were beautiful work. Everybody thought the S stood for "Sarah" or "Stephanie" and when they found that it was "Steve," they couldn't believe that an old guy would make something like that. He got a nice write up in *The Blade*.

## **Bakewell Park**

Sundays, I remember going to Collins Park with my mother and my younger brother and sisters. We used to go out there to watch the Sokols do their exercises, all in unison, all teamwork. Other times we would go out to Collins Park to watch my oldest brother Steve play baseball. He played with the Blade Senators and Kist-Cola. Bakewell Park is where the housing project is now. Today, who would want to hear about tearing up a perfectly good ball park to put up a housing project? But that is what they did. They had several ball diamonds at Bakewell Park and they were really well attended. There were usually several hundred people watching each ball game. A steady stream of people could always be seen going up to Bakewell Park to watch a ball game.

## **Concerns About Birmingham Today**

In the old days, residents simply closed their doors instead of locking them. You can't do anything like that anymore. I don't like it as much as I used to because there aren't too many old people left in this neighborhood. When they die, their homes are sold to people who are not as proud. I am sure that anyone who drives down the street can see the change. The spirit is not there anymore. I love the home where we live, but my health is failing. I would like to put my wife somewhere else before I go, because it would give me a little more peace of mind. Security is so important now. We have to be careful. I know people now that have guns in their hands when they walk out to their garages. When they reach their cars, they put their weapons away; but when they come back home they pick up their guns and go back in their homes with them. People have been shot at, their houses have been shot at, and they are scared. There are so many reasons why the neighborhood is changing. There are so many single mothers and they seem to give up. I honestly believe there has been a deterioration of the family unit because I can remember when this whole neighborhood used to seem like a big family. It was just wonderful to be alive.

## **People of Birmingham**

In summation, I would like to add a few lines about the people of Birmingham. After being interviewed several times by several people, it's difficult to come up with something new about Birmingham. Sure our own experiences were great, but there is something we might have overlooked. Perhaps it's hard to see the forest through the trees. Living in Birmingham in the 1930s, 40s, and even part of the 50s, we had something wonderful. That is not so common today. We had family, and a family is love! We had the love of a mother, the discipline of a father, the caring eyes of big brothers and sisters. It's called togetherness! We had the feeling of belonging, and a sense of security. We shared the good times and the bad times. We made do with what we had. We survived! Times were tough, but we were tougher! And we didn't lose any of those characteristics. On a busy day, when I walk into Takacs' Meat Market, or Mary's National Bakery, or even Mariska Kinsey's Funeral Home for last

respects, it is like an instant party! But parties come to an end and so do people. So what is in store for Birmingham? Who knows. But I sure enjoy telling about the oneness, the togetherness, and all the other good things about Birmingham. Its product was a lot of wonderful people. They are solid citizens. And I will brag about that as long as I live.



# Mary (Christian) King

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*Interviewed by Randy Nissen*

**M**y first years of school in Toledo were at Saint Stephen's. I was born in Czechoslovakia, in Uzhgorod (which, until recently, was under Russian rule) and immigrated to the United States when I was four years old. I ended up in Toledo about the time when I was ready for first grade. I vaguely remember that I went to school in the first grade speaking Czechoslovakian and French because we lived in Montreal for about a year. I picked up street French from the children I played with. After attending Saint Stephen's for one year, I learned Hungarian and English. When my mother tried speaking to me in Czechoslovakian, I couldn't understand it. One can only retain so much information and she was shocked that I couldn't remember.

I went to Saint Stephen's for the first three years of grade school. This came to an abrupt stop when Monsignor complained in his Sunday sermon about the financial status of the church. He said if people couldn't afford to pay tuition, they shouldn't send their children there. My father, being very proud, said, "You are going to Birmingham School tomorrow."

Of course that was traumatizing for me. I remember the first couple of weeks that I went to Birmingham School, the nuns would meet me as I came home for lunch. I was petrified. Back in those days, parishioners didn't have the friendly relationship with nuns and priests that they do today. They represented strict discipline and as they met me at the sidewalk that day that I was going home for lunch, I was terrified. They wanted to know why I hadn't come to school and I told them that my father said I had to go to Birmingham because we were poor and didn't have the money for tuition. Both nuns insisted that I come back but my father told them no. I finished eighth grade at Birmingham and because of the poor job situation, my father decided that after that, I should go to vocational school to learn a trade.

## High School

I was in the last class admitted to what was then Vocational High School. That was located where the Toledo Public Library is on Michigan Street. Originally, it was

called Woodward High School. It was coed and I remember it as a comfortable school where I could have finished my four years. But then they sent us to Webster to finish our sophomore and junior years. Then, the new Whitney Vocational School opened and I graduated from there. Webster School is where the Board of Education Building is now. We went there by bus because it was more than a mile and a half away.

I studied office practice. I took shorthand and typing for four years. I got a job early in my junior year. I did feel that in a regular high school, I could have benefited from taking all the subjects that I would have needed had I decided to go on to college. At that time I felt that the main skills I needed were those needed in an office setting.

## **World War II**

I worked for an automobile dealership. At the time war broke out, automobile manufacturing was frozen. They weren't making rubber tires and the metals were going into tanks and war related materials. Around 1941, I went back for a postgraduate course. I thought I would take some lessons on the adding machine. I took a civil service test for the government and I worked for the Army Air Force at the District Office. Toledo had an office back then that dealt with companies involved in the manufacturing of war related equipment. If they had a shortage of aluminum or whatever, our office supplied it.

## **Home Life**

I never felt that we were poor. I felt like we had a lot of security. I can't remember ever going without a meal. My mother was the kind who could make a wonderful meal from a soup bone and a pound of beef and a lot of vegetables. She always made her own noodles and had a garden. In wintertime, we would store our vegetables in a hole deeper than the frost line. We would always have vegetables throughout the winter and I would always have to go downstairs to get them. I would have to take the lid off which was usually covered with a thick carpet. Then, I would have to go down on my hands and knees and reach down. The oldest child used to have to go and get them because they had the longest arms.

We always rented. We didn't own a home until my mother sold her property in Czechoslovakia. That was funny because it was just before the war broke out and my mother cashed the check and she remembered the teller saying, "You mean you sold

your property in Europe and Hitler is knocking at the front door?" She was relieved to learn that it sold because chances are, if she hadn't, it would have been lost.

We came to America because my parents felt that Europe was always involved in wars. They were not poor in Europe. My mother came from a farming family that owned quite a bit of land, but her father had died when she was young and she was given a lot of responsibility before her time.

## **Food**

Our diets and our culinary arts are our most practiced traditions. I think if most young people today followed them, they would not have the hardships that some of them complain about. When I am shopping and I see some of the food that people buy with food stamps, I think that is sad because instead of buying packaged foods, they could buy basic ingredients and with a little preparation, they could end up with twice the food to feed their families. It would also be more nutritious.

None of us were fat but all of us were healthy. One of our traditional dishes was the beef soup that takes all day to cook. The meat was put on to cook at 1:00 and it simmered very slowly so that the water barely moved because if it cooked fast, it would be cloudy. Then, all the vegetables were added, including potatoes, celery, carrots, parsley, and onions. At about 3:00, the carrots were added and then at 4:00, the potatoes were added because they didn't take as long to cook. Then, my mother would make homemade noodles. If it was the beef soup, she would make long noodles, and if it was a pork soup, she would make the square noodles. It seems if she would make the soup, we always had lemon pie for desert. We would eat clear broth with our noodles and then my mother would bring the dish of vegetables and meat on a platter. If we had soup, by 8:00 we would be starved. She always had lemon or chocolate pie made from scratch. One pie provided a piece for each of us. I don't think that applies to today's families because today, both the husband and wife work. They don't have as much time to cook. I have seen families raised on very little if they have the "know how" and the tolerance to stick with whatever has to be done in order to make a meal from scratch. A lot of people would be better off if they would eat this way instead of on a steady diet of pizzas and hamburgers.

In Birmingham, we only used ice boxes in the summer. In the winter, we had a box in the window and kept our milk, butter, and cold items in there. We usually didn't have fresh milk, so we bought cans of evaporated milk. I can remember we made family coffee because it was very mild. As children, we would have this as a hot



drink. It was mostly evaporated milk and five parts water and a little sugar. We would have toast and a cup of what we thought was coffee. It was very weak, though, because they used chicory back in those days. I thought it tasted very bitter.

My mother tried her hardest to Americanize our family diet but my father still wanted what he was used to eating. He wanted his soup, chicken paprikash and stuffed cabbage. He didn't like steak. Although he wasn't a drinker, he liked to have a shot of whiskey before his meal.

One of the pleasant things that I remember from childhood was walking to church and back in the summertime. The front doors of the houses would be open and we would get this strong whiff of chicken paprikash. While walking past the next house, we would smell the aroma of baked goods.

## **Holidays**

Our Christmas and Easter holidays were centered around church services more than they were around gift giving. On birthdays, we celebrated with a cake but we didn't make a big fuss. My mother used to say, "If you are lucky enough to be still living, you already have a present."

## **Depression**

My mother bought clothes as we needed them. We never went without stockings and she did a lot of sewing. There were times when someone outgrew clothes or didn't want a spring or a winter coat. I recall Mom made both of my brothers outfits for spring out of one coat. That is the way it was during the Depression days. If we had a Depression today, many people would cave in. They wouldn't have the tolerance or the stamina to withstand a period of time when few had a steady income.

Back in those days, there were four of us children in our family and whenever my parents went visiting, there were no baby-sitters. So, we went along. We had rules. We sat and listened and never spoke. I remember a conversation my mother had with Mrs. Rihacek, an established member of the community, whose family owned the Tivoli Theater. My mother couldn't believe that, at one time, the economy of the country was so good and then it suddenly broke down. Mrs. Rihacek explained, "People figured that the good economy in the 1920s would go on forever, and therefore, people weren't interested in saving money." Her explanation was shocking to me because our people believed that when people worked, they should force





Church School Choir of Calvin United Church of Christ, circa 1970.

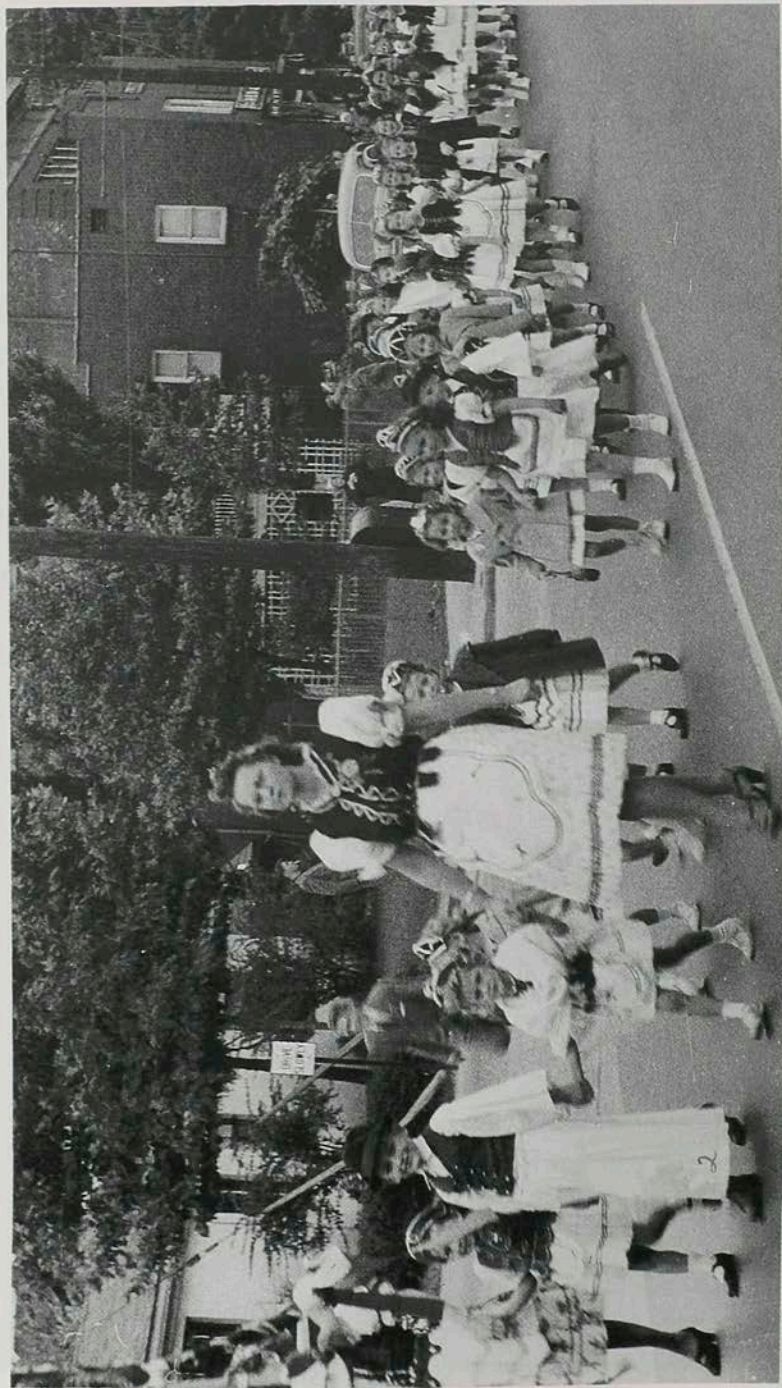


St. Stephen's Corpus Christi Procession, June 1955.



St. Michael's Byzantine Bethlehem Troupe, 1966





A Harvest Dance Parade, circa 1950.





Kindra Vargo and Paul Soltesz, Magyar Dancers.  
Performing at The Hungarian Club. 1994.

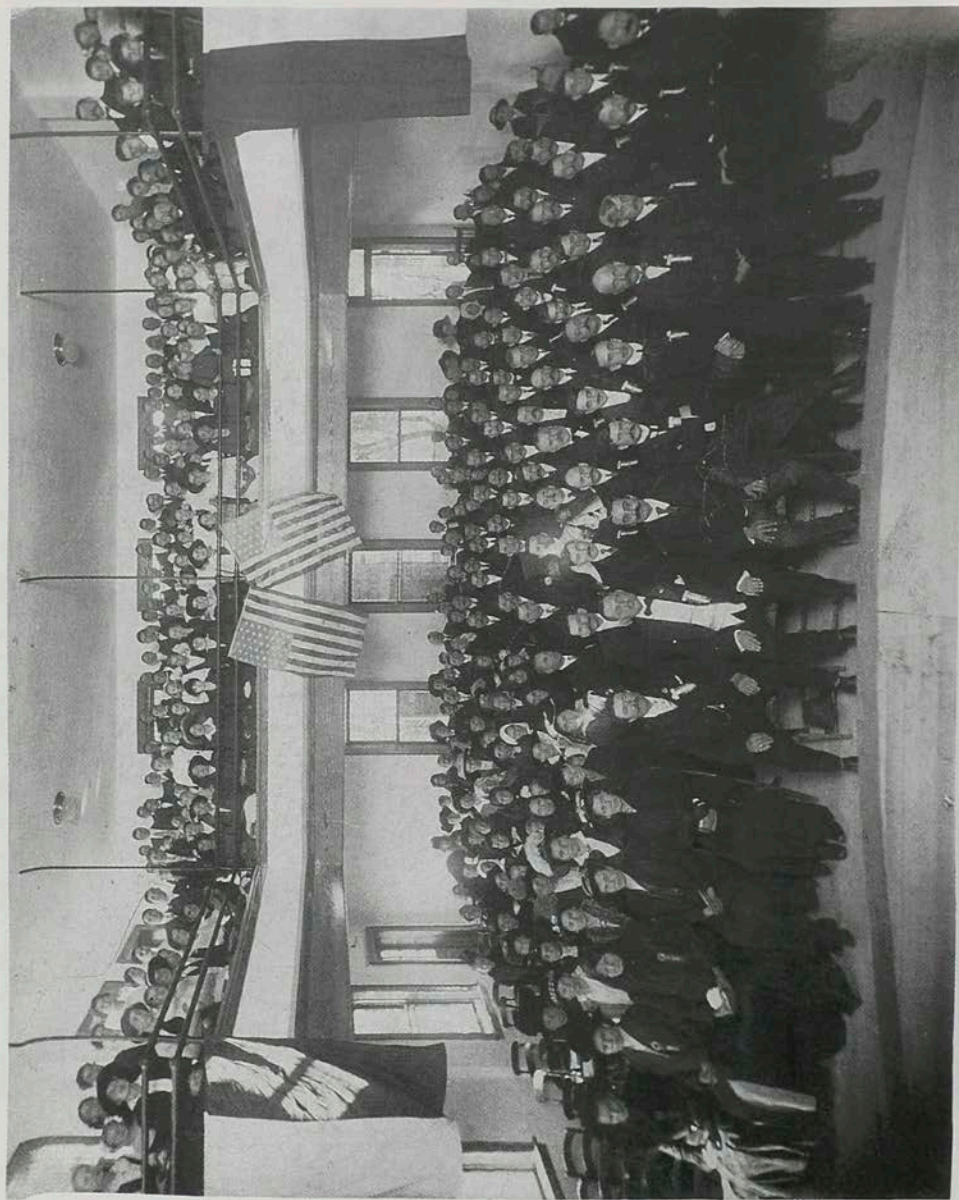


The Ujvagi-Bertalan Wedding. Mr. Gancsos is "Beating the Pan."  
November, 1980.



A Posed Dousing of Betty Horvath. Stephen Tarczali, Jr. is holding her and Andrew Bistayi handles the pan.



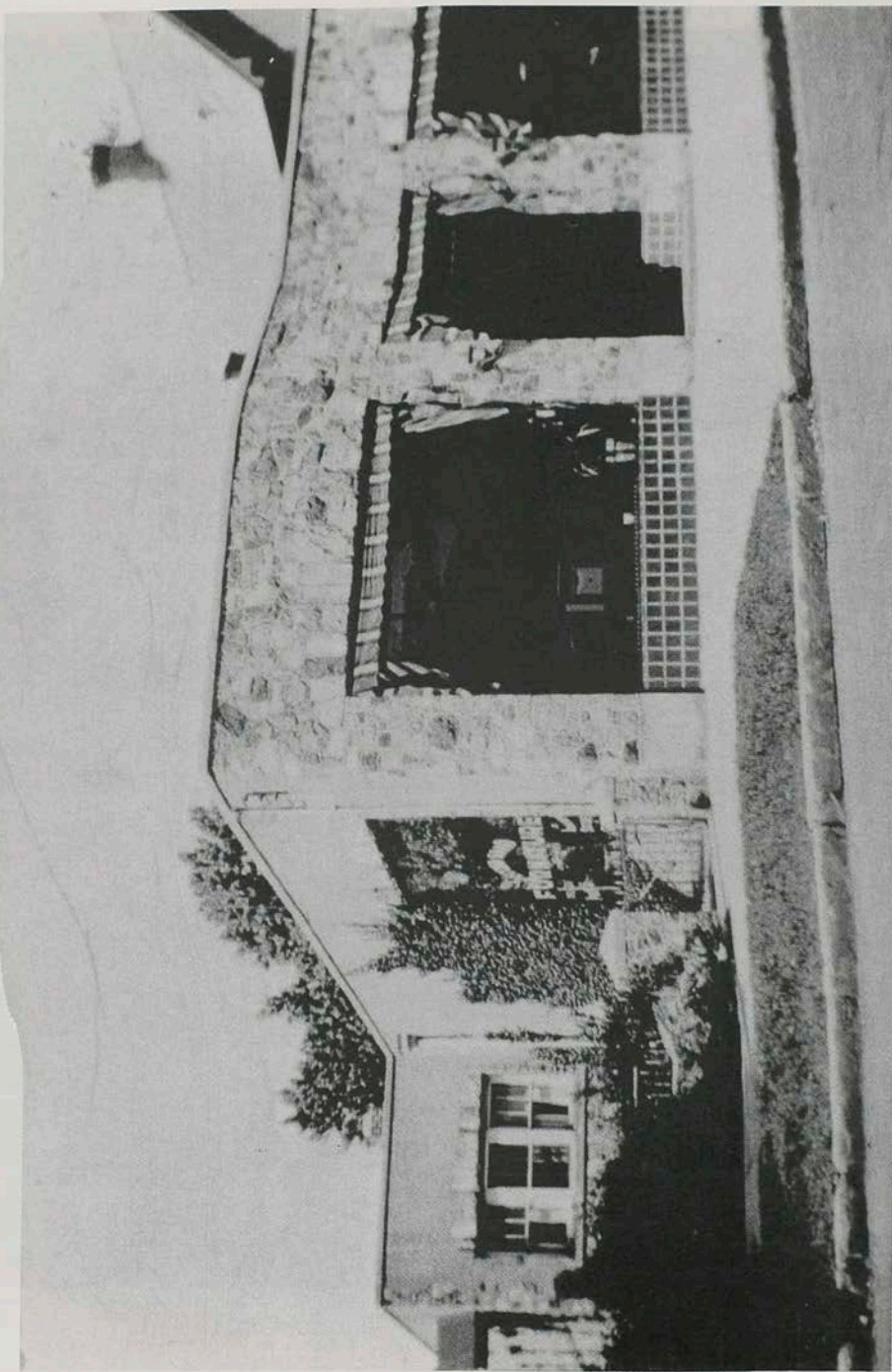


The former auditorium of Calvin United Church of Christ.  
The dedication of the school building, 1915.





The original interior of St. Stephen's Church. Circa 1940.

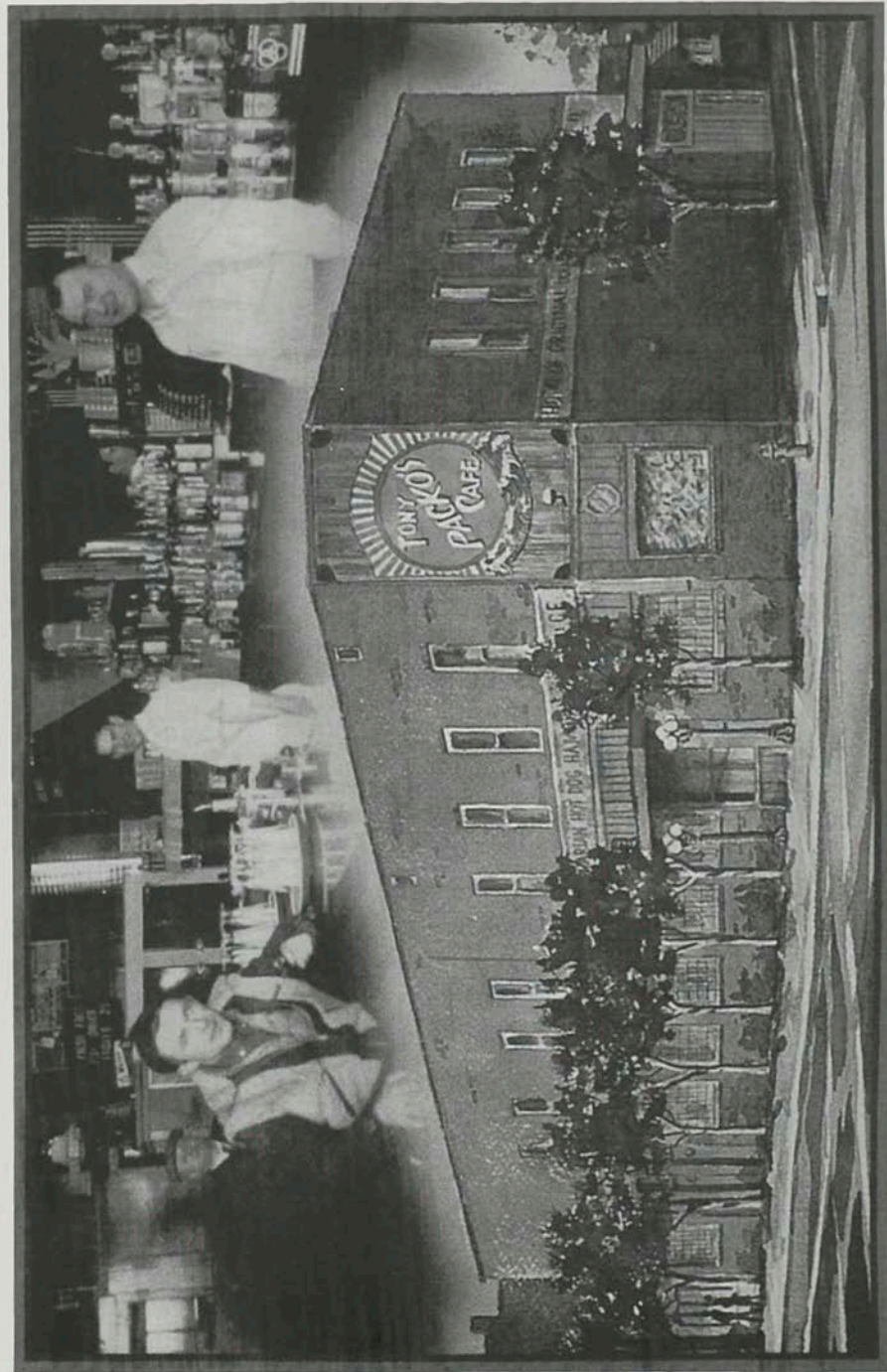


Weizer's Furniture Store prior to the addition of the  
two additional floors. 1929.





The original Shrine of the "Irish Madonna" at St. Stephen's Church.

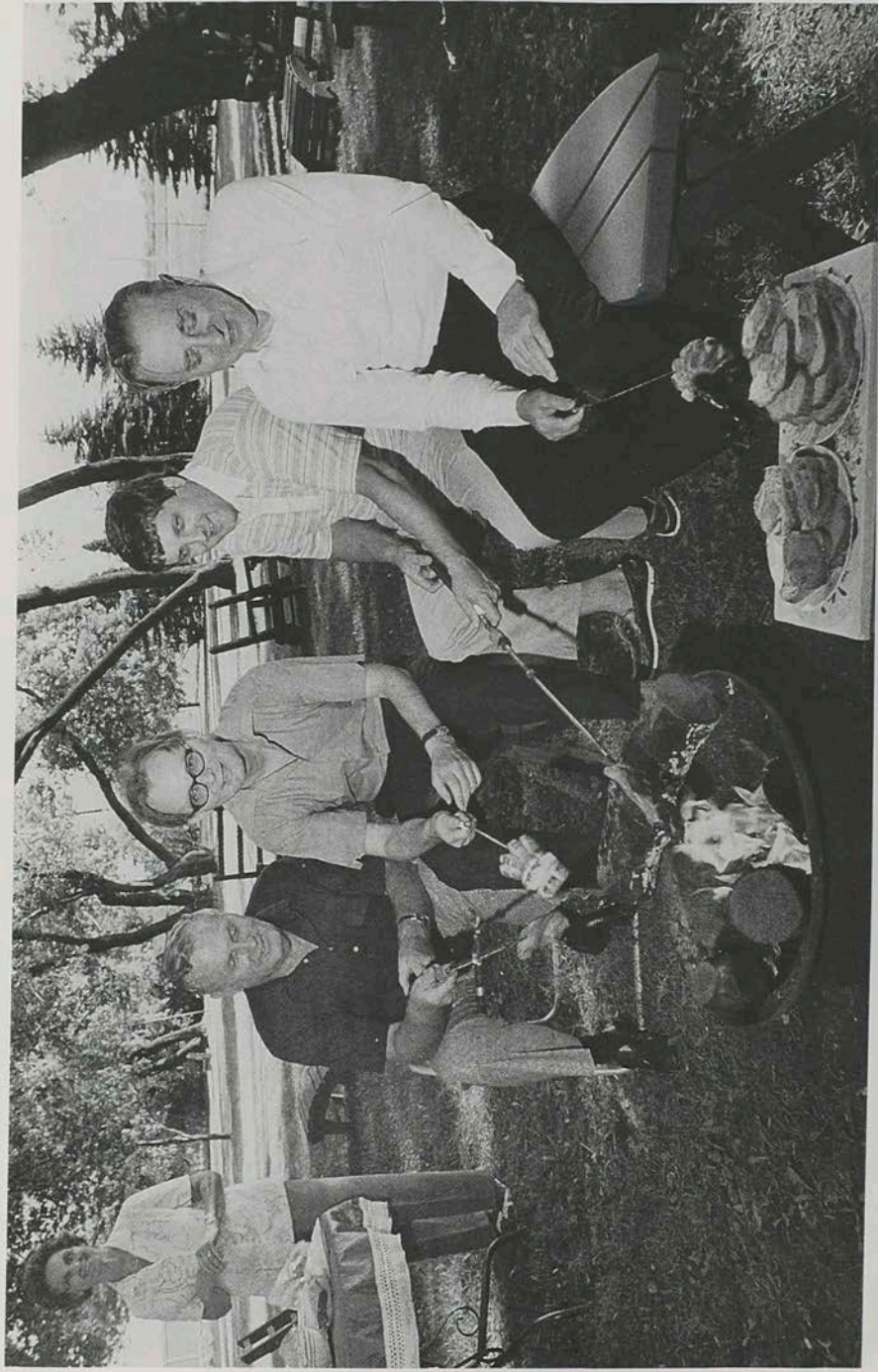


The original exterior of Tony Packo's Cafe.

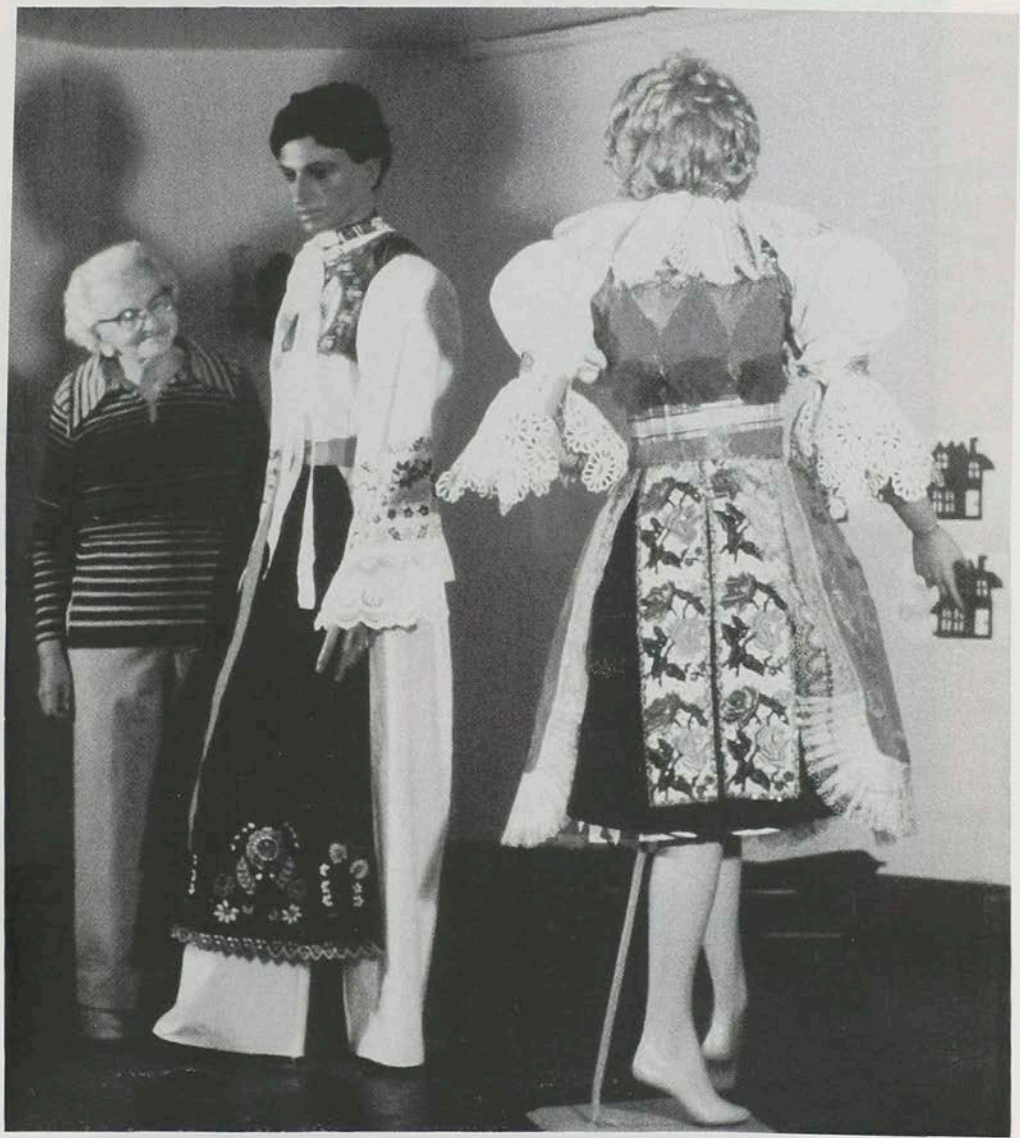




Funeral Photograph, St. Stephen's Church, circa 1917.



A Sutni ("Hungarian Turkey"). The Szollosi family, a visiting priest  
(wearing glasses) and Father Hernady. 1981.



Mrs. Grna admiring costumes she and her husband once wore at Birmingham dances. They brought the costumes with them from Czechoslovakia in 1921.





Members of Judy Balogh's Embroidery Class at The Hungarian Club,  
Birmingham Cultural Center Presentation. Circa 1990.



themselves to save no matter how much they made, so eventually, they could get ahead.

*Families that had relatives who farmed were lucky. When they would come into the city to sell their produce, then they would give what was left over to them. We didn't have any relatives in Toledo, so we were out of luck.*

My father was a blacksmith and machinist by trade and certain people who needed their horses shod would ask my father to do it. In place of money, they would pay him with their extra produce. That was a help. We always had plenty of food to eat, so I never thought of us as poor. We didn't have welfare back then. I can remember one time when we went to the firehouse to pick up some oranges, but my parents were too proud to collect charity. Today, parents who are jobless and can't feed their children apply for welfare.

## **Social Life**

Our social life was mostly visiting. We had no telephones or automobiles. My mother used to take us, three or four times a year, to the museum and we would all go on the Front Street bus and then we took a transfer on the Long Belt Street Car. That was a big treat! In the winter, Collins Park had ice skating rinks and it was jam packed with skaters. I remember entertainment in the summertime too. There were a lot of ball games for the older boys from the neighborhood who were really good at baseball. We would stand in the hot sun and watch a ball game from beginning to end.

From the time I was eight until I was eighteen (when World War II broke out) I belonged to the Sokols, a gymnastic organization that was sponsored by the Czechoslovakian people. We would go through strenuous exercises like the Olympic athletes. We had rings, parallel bars, the horse, and the balance beam. We did this on Mondays and Thursdays. I remember we went to Soldier's Field in Chicago for a national exhibition. That was a big treat to me. I stayed in a hotel and ate in a restaurant.

The Tivoli Theater had a 2:00 movie on Sundays and children would get in for five cents. There was a five year difference between me and my next sibling and I'm sure whomever was collecting knew that I was older than the rest, but somehow, we all got in for twenty cents. We would sit through the first show and if it was a dancing

movie with Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, we wanted to sit through at least half of the next showing, so we wouldn't get home until 5:00.

## **Ethnicity**

Because I was born in Czechoslovakia, my mother and father both spoke Hungarian and Slovak. I think my father considered himself more Hungarian and when I grew up, I spoke Hungarian to all of the older ladies in the neighborhood who didn't speak English. I could understand Czechoslovakian but it was not easy for me to think of words fast enough in Slovak.

I considered myself to be the same as the people who I grew up with. I think if any of them read this narrative, they would be surprised to learn that I was not Hungarian. We never really talked about that. We knew that if we stayed out of trouble and if our friends' mothers liked us, that was all that was necessary. If you weren't a good girl, you weren't invited back.

When I was a child, parents had a lot of influence in terms of who their children played with. They would watch them for the first couple of days while they were playing with other children in order to see whether they approved of how they got along. Today, I don't think parents take the time to analyze the various problems their children could get into by playing with the wrong children.

## **Bootlegging**

There were some bootleggers in Birmingham. This seems funny now since I spent most of my life in law enforcement. When I was twelve or thirteen years old, a couple of men in business suits appeared at the back door of my house and they came in and just asked questions. They showed their badges and since we weren't that familiar with Revenue Agents, we figured that maybe they had gotten lost and ended up at our house. We certainly had no reason to be afraid of them. We asked them what they had come for. They said, "One of your neighbors has reported that you are making whiskey." Of course, that was a shock to us.

Perhaps one of the neighbors thought we had a nice extra income coming in from somewhere. To add to this, my mother was a very clever lady who whipped up cakes everyday for our desert and she would put a thin layer of frosting on them which looked expensive but wasn't.

## Citizenship

During the 1960s, I was working for the Federal Government and a friend's mother planned to go to Hungary for a visit. She applied for an American passport and, to her surprise, she was informed by the State Department that she was not a citizen. She had missed the cut off time by three weeks. It seems she and her husband were married three weeks before a law was changed. She had to go to Hungary on a Hungarian Visa.

When she came back, she immediately told her daughter that she had to become a United States' citizen. I remember her as being in her seventies or eighties but she was probably a lot younger because, back then, women looked older. She was probably younger than I am now. When the time came for her to take her oath of citizenship, Mary asked me to be her mother's interpreter.

I worked for the Secret Service on the main floor and Immigration was on the third floor, so this was really easy for me. All I had to do was to tell my boss that I would be gone for a few minutes.

The immigration examiner from Cleveland just happened to be the one who was regarded as the meanest. Because the examiner had such a tough reputation, the immigration officer gave me some instructions. He told me that the examiner was going to ask twenty questions and I should translate the twenty questions in as simplest terms as possible. We started the questioning and the first one was, "Who was the first President of the United States?" I turned to her and repeated this question in Hungarian. After hearing the question, Mary's mother snapped at me by saying in Hungarian, "Lady, you know I raised a family. I had work to do. Just when in the world do you think I had time to read?" My heart was beating as fast as possible and I thought, "Well, what am I going to do with this little old lady who wants to go to heaven as an American citizen? Should I lie? Or tell the judge exactly what she was telling me?" I faced the examiner and said, "She said George Washington." The questions continued. "Who is the Mayor of Toledo?" At that time, it was John Potter. I thought to myself, "Whether she answers in English or in Hungarian, 'John Potter' will sound like 'John Potter.'" When she heard the question, she gave me the same bawling out. I told the examiner, "She said John Potter."

We went down all the questions in the same fashion. When we were finished I felt drained. My friend who was with me, acting as a stand-in, in case I couldn't make it

was petrified. When it was over, she said, "Now that we are done, where is the bathroom? Are we going to jail?"

Afterwards, to celebrate Mary's mother's citizenship, her other daughter held a big party and invited the immigration officer. We had a couple of cocktails. I said, "Jack, I have a confession to make." I told him what I had done and he said, "Mary, if that old lady couldn't have made her citizenship, I would have never forgiven you." I felt much better then.

I tell this story because I think it demonstrates how important it was for the immigrants in this country to become American citizens. They showed great loyalty to the country that gave them a new start on life. Today, youngsters take the privileges that America affords for granted. The youth of today do not understand what freedom means. I think my parents' generation felt very fortunate that they were welcomed to this land of opportunity. Even though my parents said they only came to this country for a short visit, they never spoke about going back. This tells me that no matter how hard our life was, they still thought it was better here than it was in what they called the Old Country.



# Mariska Kinsey-LaCava

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*Interviewed by John Ahern*

**W**hen we were little children, sprinkling or dousing was done respectfully. We only sprinkled older relatives and friends. My father provided transportation to those who lived farther away. It was fun to have permission to pour water combined with men's cologne on adults. The best part was the monetary reward we received for the task. Of course, it was also a blast dousing my brothers in a surprise attack. (No money was received for that!)

As we grew older, in about the seventh and eighth grade when the hormones kicked in and boys looked more interesting, sprinkling took on a different flavor. I recall a time when a group of us gathered at Sue Marie Vargo's house. While the adults were busy working, we were up to business of our own. The boys would come around with their water balloons, while we were prepared with our own balloons--most likely purchased from Szegedi's--across the street from our house. Of course we had the advantage of a house since when we got wet, we could retreat inside, dry our clothes and plot. Soon afterward, we resorted to the hoses. Eventually it became an all our war. The boys would overpower us and take the hoses. Then it became a free-for-all. Needless to say, no money was gained from this venture; our reward was the laughter and fun.

## **The Harvest Dance**

The Harvest Dance at Saint Stephen's is much like my memories of them from childhood. I think Father Hernady was very instrumental in bringing, in keeping, and in maintaining our ethnicity. When I was twenty-six, I joined the Magyar Dancers when it was first getting started again. I dance in a few ethnic festivals.

## **Cooking**

My cooking has definitely been influenced by my Hungarian heritage. Whenever there is a turkey it is always stuffed with the traditional "toltelek" including bread from the National Bakery. I always make creamed cucumbers with sour cream and vinegar as a side dish. When the main dish is "porkolt", a beef paprika stew, the side

salad is cucumbers with vinegar, onions and hot peppers. At Christmas and Easter I bake Kalacs (sweet bread), Hungarian cookies and an occasional nut roll. The Kalacs' dough makes fabulous cinnamon rolls. I buy bulk yeast from the National Bakery. I learned this cooking and baking from my mother, Hazel Kinsey. She was also the editor and brain child along with Mary Ivancso of the St. Stephen's cookbook "Secrets of Hungarian Cookery." We have five thousand cookbooks from a recent printing available in our inventory.

When we have chicken paprikas in my home, my husband, Joe W. LaCava, is the chef. My mother taught him and she taught him well. It's the best. I will never forget the first time he made the dumplings for paprikas. We were dating then. We were at my house on Whittemore Street, which was next door to my Grandma Fulop. I wasn't sure about the consistency of the dough. Before Joe could stop me, I picked up the bowl and headed next door to Grandma to inspect it. It passed inspection with flying colors. It was "just right!"

We make a lot of chicken soup. This last winter we had a perpetual batch. Every weekend and sometimes in between. For two and a half months we had chicken soup!

## **Education and Career**

I attended kindergarten at Birmingham School. I remember getting my ears pierced at the jewelry store on Whittemore at about the same time. Birmingham School was followed by eight years at St. Stephen's with nuns predominately teaching us. Then it was on to McAuley, an all girl's Catholic high school. That was my first school experience outside Birmingham. It was a cultural shock as I took for granted that holiday costumes and a close knit community existed everywhere. I was wrong. McAuley was an eye opener.

After McAuley, I went on to Lourdes College an experimental just-open-to-the-public college. I was in the first secular class at Lourdes. The classes were small. In fact, because I was the only one registered for Spanish it was tutored. I received a solid educational base after two years at Lourdes. I continued my education at the University of Toledo. In between school, I served an apprenticeship under my father, Oscar Kinsey, at Kinsey Funeral Home. I took the state boards and successfully received my funeral director's license in 1978. I continued attending college part time; worked at Tony Packo's as a hostess on weekends; and held another job in visual merchandising at Lasalle's downtown store---and all the while working when

needed for my father in the funeral business. In 1983, that changed. My mother's father, Grandpa Fulop died. My father was in the hospital and I was called upon to take up duties. After that point I became more active in the family business. My father never fully recovered from his injury and my parents needed me. That is when the business woman was "born."

## **A Woman as a Funeral Director**

I was met with much support from the community. I eventually learned that one did not need to leave home in order to grow. I often tell others: "Grow where you are planted." I never intended to stay in funeral service, let alone run a family business. The love for what I do, developed over time. I learned this love in part from my father. His emphasis was placed on getting to know the families served. You can't do that by sitting back in the office. He always said, "Come up front and be with the people." Believe it or not, I was shy at first. I was lacking in self confidence. I soon over came that by following his advice.

In the last year of my father's life, there were a number of times when we were called to his death bed. The hospital would call and the whole family would go because we thought he was going to die. He wanted the people he loved around at his death bed. Then, in true form he'd rally but, we would have had these heart wrenching situations. It was just like my dad to get us all together, have a heart wrenching situation, and then not have it be his last day! It is a good memory because we all went through this together--his almost dying and then he'd rally and be great again.

Although loyal to me, my father had a deep desire for one of his sons to run the funeral business. At one of the deathbed scenes, my father called my younger brother Stephen close to him. He asked Stephen to promise that he would get a funeral license. I did not think it was fair for my father to ask Stephen to make a promise he might not be able to keep especially, one made to my father on his deathbed.

I interceded the burden of a death bed promise. My father saw my point. He then gave Stephen his blessing to do with life whatever he chose. It just goes to show how important was for my father to have a son fill his shoes--even though I was handling the business with competence and compassion. I was still a "girl." That is why to this day I jokingly say to those curious about a female at the helm, "I am my father's oldest son." Although I'm not the oldest, nor am I a son. Father Hernady referred to me as "the female Oscar." My father in his attempt to boost my ego often said when



I entered the room “Here comes the boss.” Yep, I was the boss all right until I told him what to do. He had his way of doing things and that’s the way we did them. I learned patience.

Dad did not turn the business books over to me until December of 1985. He died in January of 1987. I will always remember the last time he sat down in the chapel entertaining a family with his jokes. They loved it. It was a cold wintry night. Not many came for visitation. It was only close friends and intimates. As for me, initially I was back in the office diligently at work. I kept hearing long silences, then laughter; silences then laughter. My guardian angel kept whispering in my ear, “Go listen and enjoy this moment for this shall pass.” At first I ignored my still small voice. But it persisted. I finally responded. I pulled up a chair and enjoyed the moment. My dad was in rare form. The Vass family was content. We all agreed that we should video tape him some day. We all agreed that he, my father, should consider renaming the funeral home “Kinsey Fun Home.” This was the last time my father sat on that couch and told his jokes in the chapel. I felt honored to be a part of it and am eternally grateful that I listened to my “still small voice.”

We never did video tape him.

## **Funeral Traditions**

At the Mass of Christian Burial in St. Stephen’s Church when one of their members dies the Rosary Altar Society line the church aisle with candles in their hands. As the casket comes into the church, the priest leads followed by the male pallbearers, then the casket with the ladies at the side with their candles. Though awkward it works. It is a beautiful and befitting tribute. Over the years, it has changed. This tradition used to include twenty to thirty women. Less women are active and many of the women who used to do it have died. The young do not replace them yet the tradition itself is still practiced. The ladies also escort the casket exiting the church. There is a traditional Hungarian song that signals when it is time to take hold of the casket. The lines of the third verse “fogjátok fel tagaimat szent olvaso beliek” are the signal. (Translation: “Take my remains you Rosarians.”) So we begin the exit process. First the altar person with the cross, then the priest, then the male pallbearers, then the casket with the ladies, then family and friends following behind. The women then line up outside at the bottom of the steps for the casket to pass through. The tribute comes full circle as the casket is placed in the hearse.



At St. Stephen's we have choir members that come faithfully. They are prepared to sing any request: Hungarian, English or Latin. It adds a special touch to each funeral Mass.

Eulogies are always given by the priest. It is only recently that family members and friends have spoken a few words about their loved ones. Over the years the church has become more receptive to the personalizing of the service.

One of the most touching moments in funerals held at St. Stephen's from our funeral home is the procession across the street. The traffic is stopped. The active pallbearers carry the casket and I lead. The family and friends follow. It is a very meaningful picture.

At Calvin United Church of Christ, the procedure is different, an hour before the service, we move the body to the church. The deceased lays in state before the funeral service. Family and friends gather, pay their respect until just before the service. Final respects are paid by family and close friends. The casket is closed and the service begins. In some cases the casket has remained open throughout the service, but mostly the casket is closed. Reverend Imre A. Bertalan presides. Rev. Bertalan has gathered historical information which covers the life of the deceased from birth to death. He then eloquently delivers this tribute at the service. The eulogy provides a personalized glimpse into the lifelong experiences of the deceased. It is a lasting tribute. It brings both insight and understanding of our Hungarian heritage. Reverend Bertalan could write a book from all he has gathered.

The funeral Masses at Holy Rosary Church require a processional drive. We are met at the front door by the priest. It is a traditional Mass of Christian Burial. They too, have faithful choir members raising their voices in unison.

I will never forget one occasion when Stanley Urbanski was driving the hearse for us. He was in his late eighties. I was outside Holy Rosary Church, guiding people to their cars, preparing them with the usual details of "Put on your Bright lights" and putting on funeral flags when suddenly the procession of cars took off! I was at the end of the line doing this and my father was behind the church with the lead car waiting for the priest. It seems Stanley saw what he mistook for the lead car and took off. So there we were, the procession without the leader. My father was frantic. He quickly got the priest and set out to catch up to not only the hearse, but the entire entourage following it. My father was driving on the wrong side of the road until he finally caught up with Mr. Urbanski-which was not an easy measure since he was

trying to follow someone driving at the high end of the regular speed limit. What an experience! We all had a good laugh later. But during the duration of the mix up it was no laughing matter as the procession was headed in the wrong direction!

At the gravesite, as we prepare to leave our loved one, a longtime tradition is practiced. Family members and friends receive a flower to place on the casket as a final tribute. This custom at one time included only the immediate family. This custom changed quite by accident to include all those gathered. It happened one day when there was a small group of fifteen mourners; five of whom were the family. It seemed rather exclusive not to include the few friends. That day everyone was included and so it began. From that day forward we gave everyone the opportunity to place a flower on the casket. We call friends forward from the back of the group so that the family can stand in witness to their friends paying tribute. This flower custom serves a purpose. It gives everyone permission to leave the cemetery without lingering and it provides a chance to say one last good-bye. We can then proceed back to our cars in a more timely fashion. It helps bring finality and closure. The casket looks beautiful with all those flowers remaining as we drive away.

After each funeral we gather family, friends, priest and funeral director for a luncheon. This luncheon gathering is held at one of several neighborhood places, St. Stephen's Church or their school hall, Calvin Hall, Holy Rosary School Hall, the VFW Post 4906, the Knights of Columbus or Tony Packo's.

It is usually catered, although at Calvin United the various church groups oversee the luncheon. There is a need to come together as a group to socialize and share a meal before going our separate ways. I always attend to oversee the completion of the process. It provides me with a warmer way to say good-bye to a family with whom I have become most intimate.

Eleanor (Weizer) Mesteller

## Eleanor (Weizer) Mesteller

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I was born in April of 1921 in Women's and Children's Hospital, now known as Riverside Hospital in Toledo, Ohio. According to my birth certificate, Dr. Howard Knisley delivered me. He was a well known doctor in Birmingham and Ironville. I recall him making house calls to our home with a black satchel. My parents were Sigmond Weizer and Ethel (Bodak) Weizer. Dad was born in 1892 and he came to the United States from the Eastern part of Hungary, which is now part of Slovakia, from the village of Reste in Abau-Megye. This is very close to the large town of Kassa, now known as Kosice. My father's parents died when he was just three years old. His father died of cholera and his mother of pneumonia. He was raised by his grandparents. He was the youngest of three children. At age fifteen, he traveled from Trieste by boat to Ellis Island and then to Toledo to live with his older, married sister, Mary Kovacs, who resided in Woodville.

My mother, Ethel Bodak, was born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania in 1901. Her father was Louis Bodak and her mother, Julia Balogh. They came to the United States from Szurte in Ung Megye, which was in Hungary and is now in the Ukraine, near Ungvar, now called Uzhgorod. It is in the lower Carpathian Mountain Range, (which, by the way, is considered furniture country.)

Grandfather Bodak was lured to the United States by the agents recruiting immigrants to work in the mines of Pennsylvania. However, after working in the mines for a week, he made up his mind not to become a bat or an owl; he would not live his life in darkness. He would do anything but that. It was dark when he went down into the mines; it was dark within the mines, and it was dark when he came out of the mines. They would work twelve to fifteen hours a day in 1892. He soon got a job soliciting newspaper subscriptions for a Hungarian newspaper publication called *Nepszava* (People's Voice); later it became *Szabadsag* (Freedom.) This newspaper is still published and is located in Cleveland, Ohio.

Grandpa Bodak was a very jovial and outgoing person. Along with his newspaper job, he also sold patent medicines and sundry items, even wedding bands to the Hungarian, Slovak, and Polish immigrant miners. He would also gather news items to publish in the Hungarian newspaper from the people whom he visited. His visits



became social events in the small mining towns. People would anxiously await them. He started work in Pennsylvania and later expanded his territory to Fairport Harbor, Ohio, where he moved his family. Later, they moved to Rossford, Ohio. My grandmother was the homemaker, and was a sweet, loving person. When grandfather heard of the paving and widening of Front Street, he bought some houses and store buildings that were there and moved them to the 300 block of Craig Street.

After 1908, grandpa was ready to settle down from his traveling job. In 1910, he founded a used furniture store and a moving business. He had a horse and a wagon. Immigrants were flocking in from Europe. He would bring them to Birmingham from the Union Station. They needed some beds and some furniture to set up housekeeping. By going to auctions, he was able to buy used furniture and stored it to re-sell it to the immigrants. Many times, he would sell the beds his family was sleeping on if he needed to make a sale. Mother often said it was lucky that it was against the law to sell used mattresses, so the family was spared, at least, from having to relinquish their mattresses. Grandpa was a natural salesman. When he found large supplies of items at auctions or job lot sales, he would go huckstering through Birmingham chanting his wares through the streets. Sometimes, he would sell used carpet runners, produce, and even toilet paper.

During the early 1900s, grandfather was instrumental in bringing several relatives to the United States by vouching for them. Luckily, everyone turned out to be good citizens, and were never on welfare.

## **Parents**

My mother was a tomboy and she was my grandfather's "son." She drove the horse and wagon and would drive to the job lots and auctions with Grandpa. Mother had one sister who was a charming person. Aunt Jenny was also sickly. She died at the age of twenty-five.

An acquaintance of grandpa's arranged for my mother to meet Sigmond Weizer who was, by that time, quite a debonair young man who owned a saloon on Woodville Road. He was a good catch. Mom and Dad had a short courtship and were married. Mother refused to be a saloon keeper's wife, so Dad sold his business and bought into my mother's family's used furniture business. Their store was at 301 Craig Street. We lived in the rear of the store. This is where I lived after I was born. My brother, William, was born three years later. My mother was a very intelligent, aggressive, and progressive person with only an eighth grade education. Had she



gone to high school and college, which was denied her, she could have been a renowned architect or a lawyer.

## **Remembrances**

My first recollection as a child was wanting to go to school when I was three and a half. I wanted to go to school with the other, older children. I cried. My mother told me that she took me to Birmingham School and Miss Nellie, the kindergarten teacher, said that as long as I didn't wet my pants, I could go to school. I made sure I was good. I can also remember coming home and crying to my parents one day that Mrs. Graether, our principal, was sick and in the hospital. On that same day, I had a high fever, which turned out to be whooping cough. I had to stay home and just watch the children going and coming from school and I yearned to join them. I can also remember Christmas, as a child, putting out our largest and longest stockings, and in the morning, being delighted to find nuts, fruit, and candy. I also remember bathing in a wash tub, and that we had a coal and gas stove in our kitchen to heat the water.

## **The Weizer Furniture Building**

After my brother William was born, my parents bought the Congregational Church on Paine Ave. at the sight of our present furniture store. They had it moved to Craig Street in the last block, and remolded it to a four family apartment building. Then, they worked on plans for a new store building, toying with the idea to attach a residence to the store so that my brother and I would have their watchful eyes caring for us. The store would be open until 9:00p.m. Even then it was difficult to find good domestic and reliable help to look after children. They also considered building a home in Eastmoreland, now a part of Oregon. They decided to build the store with the residence attached. When I was seven, our new store, now renamed Weizer Furniture Company, at 208 Paine Ave. was built and we moved in during July of 1929.

It was really wonderful, a new home with lots of rooms. We had a furnace instead of a stove in our house, and we had a regular bathroom. Horace Wachter, a prominent Toledo architect, drew up the plans with Mom's input. Originally, it was planned as a three story, full basement building, but the cost of fifty thousand dollars, in 1928 was prohibitive. My parents decided to cut the building down to one floor and put a flat roof on it. The natural stone came from a Stony Ridge pigsty. My mother and

father separated the stones and then brought them on their truck to 208 Paine Ave. As money became available, they added other floors to the building.

My mother had to travel to Chicago by train to buy new furniture at the furniture market. Aunt Jenny would watch us and help my father in the store while she was away. Dad remained in charge of the store. Mother was the first woman furniture buyer in the Chicago Furniture Mart.

In 1929, the Great Depression and bank crash occurred. The years following that were probably the most trying for our family. When the shipments of new furniture arrived, my parents had the funds to pay for the merchandise in the bank, but the banks closed and their money was tied up. The merchandise had to be paid for, so my parents had to borrow money from friends and relatives. As the years went on, the Depression worsened. During those hard times, my mother had the tenacity to hang on to the building (which we almost lost.) By 1939, the mortgage was paid with bank claims and money and my parents were ready to go ahead and build the other two floors. They were their own contractors.

## **Childhood**

My brother and I went to Birmingham School and attended Sunday school at the Hungarian Reformed Church, which is now called Calvin United Church of Christ. I took piano lessons and went to Girl Scouts at the church. I think we had the best troop in town. It was troop #7; that means we were the seventh Girl Scout troop in the city of Toledo. Our leaders were Elizabeth Komaromy, and Betty Balasz, and, later, Ethel Molnar, who remained our leader for many years. I went on to the Senior Girl Scout Troop at the Girl Scout Little House on Ashland Ave. Our group at the Hungarian Reformed Church was comprised of girls belonging to Saint Stephen's, Saint Michael's, and the Hungarian Reformed Church, along with a few girls who went to Birmingham School, who were not members of any of the Birmingham churches.

My brother spent much of his afternoons and weekends at my grandparents' home on Wheeling Street. Grandpa came every day for my brother. He even bought him a pony. By the seventh grade he became quite spoiled and his lessons were suffering, so my parents decided, to my grandparents' dismay, to send my brother to military school until his discipline and studies improved. He did so well there, he remained all through high school.

## The Making of Whitney Vocational High School

I went to Vocational High School and took courses in retail sales. In my junior year, the Vocational High School became Macomber High School in a new building on Monroe Street. It ceased being a coed school. The remaining girls (sophomores, juniors, and seniors) were placed on the upper floor of Webster School at Manhattan and Elm. The school for girls would cease when the remaining girls graduated. It was here that I became a new person, seeing for myself that the remaining girls would finish school at Webster, which was primarily an elementary school, and the girls' vocational school would be abolished.

A handful of us, who were juniors, decided to stage a walkout. We went to the Superintendent of Schools and demanded to be accepted at Macomber, until they would build us a Girls' Vocational High School. I consented to be in the walkout, but I said that I would not be a spokesperson. Our spokesperson went to see Mr. Bowsher, the Superintendent, and after talking to him, he came into the auditorium where about 25 of us were seated. He told us we should be good girls and go back to our classes as though nothing happened. He promised we would not be disciplined. Of the twenty-five girls who walked to the Board of Education on Southard Street, no one spoke up. I couldn't stand the verbal slap in the face, so I spoke up and said, "No. We are not satisfied. What do you think we came here for?" That was the beginning of my battle. The *Toledo Blade* made headlines of our action and my name appeared in the news story. That night, my mother and other parents and some of our teachers got into the act, and through our efforts, Whitney Vocational High School opened two years later.

After graduating from high school, I went to Frances Harrington School of Interior Design in Chicago, to further my preparation for our family furniture business. In 1939, on the day that Mom drove me to Chicago, war broke out in Europe. On Sunday, December 7th, 1941, I was in Chicago. I didn't know that Pearl Harbor was bombed until 5:00 P.M. when I met another girl from Toledo for dinner at Ricket's, a famous restaurant on Chicago Avenue (on Chicago's northside). She was the one who told me the news.

## Marriage

John Mesteller had been writing to me from Randolph Field in Texas. John was from Birmingham and belonged to our church. I had known him and his family for several years. A mutual friend gave John my Chicago address. I received a letter from him



one day before Pearl Harbor, stating that he expected to be transferred to Chanute Field in Illinois. He wrote that he would like to visit me in Chicago on his weekend passes. With the war breaking out, all leaves and transfers were canceled. Nevertheless, John and I maintained our correspondence, which gradually progressed into a mail romance. After six months, I was back in Toledo for the summer. John was on furlough and we dated for several weeks in 1942. He entered Officer's Candidate School in Miami Beach, Florida. His parents and I visited him when he was commissioned a second Lieutenant. Shortly after, we became engaged. John was then sent to Trinidad and Curacao in the Caribbean for two years. He returned to Rome Army Airfield in upper New York State. While he was on leave, we were married in the Hungarian Reformed Church in Toledo in March of 1945.

We had a small, catered reception for 25 people at the Hillcrest Hotel. We had to turn in our sugar ration stamps for our wedding cake and had chicken because meat was also rationed and we didn't have enough meat ration stamps to feed 25 people. We spent our honeymoon at Niagara Falls, which was frozen over. We were among the only ones there, besides the caretaker. We traveled then to Rome, New York, where we had a little apartment until May of 1945 when John was transferred. I came home to my parents to work in the furniture store until John was released from service in July. After five and a half years of service, John came home to Toledo.

### **Looking Ahead End of the War**

The ending of the war was a very joyous and memorable time; celebrations lasted at least a week. It was 4:00 A.M. when we were awakened by gun blasts, fire crackers, horns, and noisemakers. People were shouting, "The war is over!" Years later, Charlotte Sarka Lindell, our faithful employee, confessed that she and her brothers and friends had requisitioned our garbage can lids, and used sticks to pound them to make noise while marching through Birmingham.

Once the war was over, there was a decision to be made: what were we going to do about our future? John had a job at the National Cash Register Company waiting for him. My parents wanted to go to Florida and wanted us to take over their business. We would be co-partners in the business. With my encouragement, John made the decision to accept their offer.



## After the War

We were constantly enhancing the quality of the merchandise in the store. In 1956, the Hungarian Revolution took place. John and I became involved by helping those in Europe due to a report that I gave at our missionary guild at Calvin Church about the Revolution. Revered Joseph Zsiros, our minister, asked me to join an ecumenical committee to send relief to war torn Hungary. We met at Saint Stephen's church rectory on Halloween night in 1956, less than a week after the Revolt. Members from Saint Stephen's, Saint Michael's, Calvin United, and a few Jews of Hungarian heritage attended. Marge Georgi and I were the only women on this committee and we were to do something with the women of the community. We decided to have a drive like the March of Dimes. We asked for women's group leaders and successfully launched an hour march in December of 1956 to canvas Birmingham. We assigned to each team, women from different religious beliefs. The march was particularly successful in creating camaraderie between the different congregations. It was one of the starts of ecumenical harmony in the community. We collected \$1300. As the Communists re-entered Hungary with greater force, our energies focused on the refugees coming to the United States. A large contingent came to Toledo and all needed clothing. Our friend, Father Paul Palka, then at the Marblehead Catholic Church, and formerly, at Holy Rosary Church in Birmingham, telephoned us that he wanted to help with our relief efforts. His church had collected and sorted into several barrels, clothing that was originally supposed to be shipped to China or Korea, but the church members in Marblehead agreed to let Father give it to our Birmingham group for Hungarian Relief. John drove to Marblehead with our truck and brought the barrels of clothing to Calvin United Church where refugees, regardless of their religion, came to get clothing and shoes. Many activities were organized to accommodate and aid the refugees. This was a time when there was a revival of Hungarian customs and language, because of the influx of hundreds of the refugees. The customs had been fading after W.W.II. This was a time of change. The population of Birmingham was changing.

We continued our business at the Paine Ave. location. We really couldn't sell our building because we had just taken over the building from my parents and we didn't want to disrupt our children's education at Birmingham School, or distance ourselves from our church and the Birmingham library, which is across the street. We stayed. We used all forms of advertising to draw customers into our store. We couldn't survive on neighborhood business alone. Advertising changed. My parents used handbills and newspaper advertising when they could afford it. As soon as I could drive our car, at age 16, I would recruit boys and girls to carry handbills all over

Birmingham and other parts of East Toledo. This continued for many years. Later, John and I went to television as well as continuing with newspaper ads. Sometimes we used radio and direct mail advertising. *The Sun*, an East Toledo/Oregon newspaper, was also a publication we used monthly.

We attended furniture markets at least twice a year in Chicago, Dallas, or Atlanta. We also visited furniture factories as we upgraded our merchandise and styles. In 1983, our son, Glenn took over the company, continuing the operations and improving quality. He has the aid of Charlotte Sarka Lindell.

As I reminisce about our lives and business, I realize we are the oldest business in Birmingham. We are still operated by the same family, and also, we are the oldest furniture store in Toledo operated by the same family. Charlotte started working for us before she went to Waite High School. She was our baby-sitter and came to dust furniture daily after school. Later on, she became an all around worker in our home and in the store. Today, Charlotte is Glenn's "Girl Friday," selling, ordering, managing, and helping with the bookkeeping.

## **Traditions**

Over the years, our family participated in the Hungarian traditions in our home and in the community. One special tradition is Abauj Bethlehem which heralds the Christmas holiday. When I was a girl, my parents would invite the groups from Saint Stephen's and Saint Michael's to come into our store to perform their rituals. I never got to hear the performance clearly because I used to hide in the bathroom. I wanted to escape from the oregs.

On Easter Monday, I was doused. The boys would make a kind of perfumed water in pop bottles. They would use face powder, and perfume or cologne. It was mixed with water which made a milky liquid with a perfumed odor. Sometimes, it would stain a girl's hair and clothing when the liquid dried. The boys would put a cloth over the top of the pop bottle and tie it with a string and that is how they would pour the liquid on your head, so that it wouldn't come out all at once.

I cannot recall the Harvest Dances in Birmingham before W.W.II, as I was too young. During the war, the older girls in the community would gather on Saturday night, at the Gypsy Camp, later known as the Playdium, to dance to John Virag's Gypsy Orchestra. The boys on furlough would come there. It was the neighborhood social meeting place.

When I went to Birmingham school, it was comprised of children from many churches. Because my brother and I were children of community business people, we were ecumenically and racially understanding. The customers in our store were our friends and we treated them equally, whether they were Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Black, White, or Atheist. Ecumenicalism and racial tolerance have always been personal crusades of mine in Birmingham.

### **The Next Generation**

Our daughter, Jean, was married to Theodore Meyers from Leipsic, Ohio in 1968 in Calvin United Church of Christ. They reside in Leipsic and Jean teaches elementary school in the Leipsic School System. Their daughters are: Elizabeth Jean, born in 1975, and Suzanna Marie, born in 1979. Elizabeth, who is also known as Liza, entered Case Western Reserve University in the college of Engineering in the fall of 1993, on a Presidential Scholarship. Suzi is in high school and is an active basketball player. Glenn was married to Pauline Benn in 1973 in Saint Paul Lutheran Church. Pauline is a teacher at Birmingham School. Glenn is now the owner and manager of Weizer Furniture Company. They have two children. Jason Mesteller, born in 1977, attended Central Catholic High School. He was a very conscientious student and played football there. He now attends the University of Toledo. He is also skilled in Karate. Justin, our youngest grandson, was born in 1980 and goes to Central Catholic High School, where he is also a very good student and plays baseball. He, too, is active in Karate.

We are very proud of our grandchildren and hope they become among the finest citizens of this great country without denying their Hungarian heritage. We hope they will remember and participate in some of the customs of their forefathers and maintain our family's traditions and history. Our family has been very fortunate. Our ancestors were all fine people. They were ambitious, diligent, and aggressive, ever mindful to see that their children received the best education that they could give them.





# Don and Barb Nyitray

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*Interview by Michelle (Shelly) Nyitray.  
The interviewees were Don Nyitray, Shelly's father,  
and Barb Nyitray, Don's sister.*

*Barb*

I have very good memories of my childhood. My class was very close, simply because we all started kindergarten together and most of us went to high school together. All of us lived within blocks of each other. Our parents knew each other; our grandparents knew each other because everyone lived in Birmingham and married people from Birmingham.

We were taught by nuns, Daughters of Divine Charity, in 1955-1963. They were very strict. Sister Camille had a very sweet face. In those days, we had wrought iron desks. If we banged our shoes against the wrought iron, it made a loud clanging sound. One day, Sister Camille had enough of this. She said, "If you don't stop, I'm going to tie you up!" That afternoon, after lunch, when we came back to school, she scotch-taped our mouths row by row. Then, we took our shoes off and she brought the clothesline from the convent and she tied us by our ankles to the desks. That was her discipline. At that time, I did not know how to tie my shoes, so I was afraid that my mother would find out because there was no reason for my shoes to be untied. I hurried home from school and ran up to my bedroom to change into my play clothes so she wouldn't realize that my shoes were untied.

Most of the nuns were very nice. I have many pictures of them. I have pictures from the May Crowning, eighth grade graduation, and kindergarten, all featuring the nuns. My class did everything together. We had lunch at each others' houses, and spent the nights at each others' homes. At the grade school reunion which we held in 1988 in the basement of Saint Stephen's, everybody remembered each other and talked at length about the things we did. My sister and I dressed in our Hungarian costumes like most of the girls who danced in the Festival of Grapes, the Harvest Dance. In those days, the grade school children

entertained, besides dancing at the Sureti Ball. We also put on little plays. We sang a Hungarian song called *Edes Anyam*, “My Sweet Mother,” which I had to learn.

## Holidays

*Don* We spent a lot of time together because television had not yet been invented. Many Sundays, we went to Crane Creek State Park, East Harbor State Park, and Vista Villa in Port Clinton. Saint Stephen’s and other churches had festivals through June, July, and August. Various organizations would host events in the backyards, which could probably be considered the first “beer blasts.” The kids ran around like crazy. The adults just sat around drinking beer, shooting the breeze, listening to music, and dancing. It was something to do because nobody watched television. It took an organization to get together a bus trip to go to Tiger’s Stadium, which was an all day affair. Before I was born, the big thing for people in Birmingham was to walk to Collins Park because there were only ten to fifteen cars and trucks in the neighborhood. They would walk to the park for a Sunday outing of softball games, home cooked meals, and picnic baskets. They would walk there and walk back home again before dark.

*Barb* Christmas was always traditional (Christmas food was ham.), just like Easter. Because we were firm Catholics, we fasted through Lent and we didn’t eat meat on Fridays. I remember sitting at home on Holy Saturday before Easter, waiting for the church bells at Saint Stephen’s to ring at six p.m. because we couldn’t eat meat before then on Saturday. Then, on Easter Sunday, we would dive into the sausage and ham.

On Good Friday, we were allowed one meatless meal, so all we ate were my great aunt’s nut rolls with milk. Then, on Holy Saturday, there was the Easter Food Blessing. We took a basket of food to the church, and that night, we had veal pocket with dressing, mashed potatoes with gravy, and sitka, which is Easter cheese. On Sunday, we had ham and kolbasz.

*Don* When we were children, there were three acting troupes called “Bethlehemes.” The boys would go around to different homes (if they

were let in) and to the neighborhood bars. They would put on the same plays that they do today. Volunteers who were able to read the Hungarian dialogue were in the plays. They would all go around the neighborhood before Midnight Mass. Now, they only perform at Midnight Mass; they don't go around to the homes anymore. My mother said, when she was young, the players would ride around on horses. What was funny about this was that every kid waited for the event, yet when the day came for these acting troupes to go around, the kids were so afraid. The actors wore cowbells. The performers were dressed as shepherds who wore fur vests and masks and had tails tied with cowbells and carried axes.

*Barb* They were supposed to chase the boys and kiss the girls. Sometimes, they would get carried away with their roles and they would really scare us. When I was really small, I can remember hiding behind the Christmas tree when they came to my dad's bar despite the fact that many of them were my uncles and cousins. My friends and I were terrified when we heard those cowbells! I remember running upstairs and hiding under my parents' bed, the closet, anywhere; yet, I loved it! We waited for it every year but it was very frightening.

*Don* Another holiday tradition is the house blessing administered by the priest and two altar boys. Every January, they write: 19+(last two digits of the year)+ G+M+B over the front door of the house. The letters represent the three wise men. This is an annual tradition.

### **Mass**

We lived across the street from the church. At that time, all the Masses had four altar boys. We also had high and low Masses, which doesn't happen anymore either. At communion time, the priest would go to the altar railing to serve the communion with two altar boys helping by carrying the plate in case the priest would drop the host. The other two boys would light candles, one to the left and one to the right. No one ever walked straight out the door after receiving communion. Everyone stayed until the Mass was completed.

*Barb* There was Mass before school each morning and on Sunday. On Saturdays, the girls had to clean the church while the boys were learning

their prayers as well as bell ringing. A couple of times a year, we performed "The Living Rosary." The girls were the "Hail Mary's," the boys were the "Our Fathers," and the "Glory Be's." There were rigid customs and traditions, so as a result, I ended up spending seven days a week in the church. When I went, we had to sit with our class, even on weekends. Monday mornings, Father Hernady would walk around and quiz us about the sermon. If we could not recite some of his favorite Mass prayers, then it was too bad for us.

We were not allowed to leave church or to get out of the pews until the priest left the altar. When I was in eighth grade, the older girls (7th and 8th grade) used to sing in the choir for weekday Mass. The girls began to wear uniforms in 1963 at Saint Stephen's. We had blue beanies on our heads. One time our principal, Sister Emily, slapped a girl so hard that her beanie flew off because she left church before Father left the altar. Things were much more strict in those days. Mass and many of the hymns were in Latin. We also had to learn Hungarian hymns, which are still sung on different occasions to this day.

## Weddings

*Don* At Saint Stephen's, weddings involved half of the neighborhood because so many families were intermarried. The whole block could be made up of brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, and nieces and nephews. Weddings started at 9:00 a.m. Mass was first, followed by a sit down breakfast, then by certain, traditional activities like going to the cemetery to visit deceased relatives to put some wedding flowers on their graves and riding around the neighborhood blowing the horn on the car. Then, the wedding party and guests would get to take a break, before they had to go back to the church for dinner at night. There were usually between five hundred to seven hundred people there. At my sister, Judith's wedding, our Uncle Emery stood there with a pan and a wooden spoon. The bridal dance was done by the oldest uncles in the family. One uncle held the pan and the wooden spoon to bang on it.

*Barb* Another uncle said the words which mean "bride for sale." It is an old custom. The bride is put up for sale. Everybody throws a dollar into the pan to dance with the bride.



*Don* Another uncle waits with a tray of whiskey glasses for the men. There would be so many people that the dance with the bride could only last ten seconds. They would close the bar at this time so the bartender could have a break to eat.

*Barb* After all the male guests have danced with the bride, it is finally the groom's turn. He throws in his wallet to signify that he gives all that he has to buy his bride. This is done at every wedding. Everyone who participates in the Bridal Dance surrounds the bride and groom during this dance, singing and holding hands. It is a very traditional bonding experience.

Weddings were super. They used to put sawdust on the floor. I spent most of my time on my rear end trying to get from one end of the room to the other because the floor was so slippery. The music was always Hungarian. Chicken paprikash was served. Our great aunt was head cook in the old kitchen.

At school, the first Friday of each month the 8th grade girls sold cupcakes to their class. We had masks and a little party on Halloween. We always had to dress up as saints. We weren't allowed to dress up as anything else. I always went as Saint Ann.

## **Birmingham**

The reason that Birmingham is called Birmingham is because the smokestacks at a neighborhood factory resemble those at a factory in Birmingham, England. That is how it got its name.

There was no reason to go outside the neighborhood for anything. We had our own grocery stores, butcher shops, tailors, bakers, shoe repair shops, dry cleaners, library, schools, and churches.

*Don* Many Hungarians worked either at the Interlake Iron Corporation or the Vaicast both located on Front Street or at the Maumee Malleable on Woodville Road. The people were very nice and welcomed Hungarian immigrants. Word spread around very quickly that there were jobs available and that is why the Hungarians were so prevalent. The shipyards, the refineries, Unicast, Paragon Oil on Front Street, Brickshoe

Foundry on York and Wheeling, Burt Foundry (which is near the Buckeye Brewery) grocery stores, and bars in the neighborhood, all hired Hungarians. There were no malls. Sometimes we went downtown to do Christmas shopping at Tiedtke's, but that was very rare.

Nobody had a freezer. There were no frozen chickens or TV dinners. Everything was fresh. If you were going to have chicken to eat Saturday evening, you bought it, killed it, and cleaned it on Friday so that it would be ready to cook on Saturday. Everyone had a root cellar in their backyard. It was a big hole in the ground lined with brick. They also had roofs to keep out the rain. These cellars often reminded one of a doghouse in their appearance so they could keep their potatoes through the winter. It seemed like between every fifth house, there were two smokehouses. Everybody shared smokehouses. They filled them with bacon and ham and people made their own sausage.

*Barb* A huckster used to come twice a week with fruits and vegetables.

*Don* He had items which could not be grown in backyard gardens, such as bananas. Everybody had their own garden. There was a section of land off of Front Street (owned by one of the railroads) where they allowed Birmingham residents to plant gardens on four to five acres of ground. Everyone selected a hunk of ground to grow things they couldn't grow in their backyards, like sweet corn, which takes a good deal of room.

## **Military**

Although many Birmingham men went into the military and died serving, I never went into the military. All of the churches had long rosters listing the men who died. My father never went. Everyone in our family was fortunate. During the war, Dad was working at a steel mill in Detroit. Because he was such an expert at gauging steel, he was more valuable here at home than he would have been over-seas. Then, due to a job-related accident, he lost the sight in his right eye, so he went back to work at his father's bar, which he eventually bought. They lived in Wyandotte, Michigan, in a solid Polish neighborhood and they stayed there until 1947. My sister, Judy was born in 1940 at Wyandotte General Hospital.

## **Women's Roles**

*Don* Women were housewives and mothers in those days. The only jobs women could have were those of telephone operators, saleswomen, or clerks in family butcher shops or grocery stores. My mother tended bar with my father. Women didn't go out of the neighborhood unless they were cleaning women. When Dad used to take us to Franklin Park to get ice cream at the dairy, we considered that a big ride. Out on Monroe Street, I was in a foreign land. I didn't know where I was when I was out there.

If families needed money, then the children went to work out of grade school. Dad only finished grade school. He never went through high school, but my mother did. Families whose fathers were supervisors at the factories were better off. If the son was athletically inclined, he could go to high school and play football or baseball. Education wasn't important, especially for the women.

## **The Sheeny**

*Barb* The sheeny was a junkman who collected rags and other worn out items. He rode through the neighborhood on a horsedrawn wagon. He would park his horse and wagon on Genesee Street under a tree by Kinsey's funeral home, put a feedbag on the horse, and then walk into one of the bars for his "lunch". He blew his horn as he drove through the alley, so we would always know when the "sheeny" was coming.

## **Youth Activities**

*Don* There were young peoples' clubs like the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) and the Toledo Council of Catholic Youth (TCCY) but everyone got married young, especially when the guys came back from the Second World War. There were social groups for girls like the Sodality and the Brownies. One thing that was not popular in Birmingham, however, was the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts.

*Barb* One of the ladies from the church had a Brownie troop. When we reached eighth grade, we were allowed to take buses downtown to see shows. People dressed up for the city which was a big deal. The Tivoli,

the neighborhood movie theater, showed the same movie four times. We went in the daylight and came home in the dark. We could get by with 50 cents. It only cost a quarter to get in and then we got our ice cream or popcorn and spent the whole day in the theater watching movies. It was very safe in the neighborhood in those days so we didn't have to worry about being out in the dark.

There was something called "teen town." By the time I was in seventh grade, there were dances at Collins Park. Also, there was a drug store called Reeds where the kids hung out. We used to go there for Cherry Cokes. We just walked through the neighborhood at night, talking. There wasn't any need for special accommodations because nobody bothered us.

Another popular pastime in the summertime was to walk across the Consaul Street Bridge to go to an ice cream store on Summit Street and then to eat the ice cream cone on the way back across the bridge. We also visited with each other. We walked around in groups and did not become involved in mischief or vandalism because everyone knew who you were and they would say to your parents, "Do you know what your kid just did?" Then, you would get in trouble when you got home. We did our homework at the library. There was always something we could find to do. We ate at each others' houses too. It never entered our minds to vandalize anyone's property. Our families never had to wonder where we were because we never left the neighborhood.

Don      Aside from getting together in groups, we would listen to the radio, to *Terry and the Pirates* and *Captain Marvel*. We would have to have our decoder rings on when the announcers would give us our message for the day. We would write it down in our code books and they would always be something like "tune in tomorrow."



## **Security**

*Don*

The house on Consaul Street, which belonged to our great aunt, had a wood framed front door with a solid piece of glass. What was amazing was the skeleton key, which worked in many locks. When they would lock the door to go to church, they had a glass mailbox and they would put the key to that door in the mailbox. People used to go on vacation and never lock the door! Nobody locked doors. People could leave things outside all night long and they would still be there in the morning.

## **Surrounding Community/Ironville**

None of us who were Catholic went to Birmingham School. Usually, the non-Catholics in the neighborhood went to Birmingham School. The Catholics went to Saint Stephen's or Holy Rosary. In Ironville, the majority was comprised of French and Italians. Holy Rosary Church, to this day, is still Czechoslovakian and Italian, which have little in common. Ironville was bulldozed twenty-five to thirty years ago. The French people are gone. (That would be a neighborhood to study.) There is a pond there out of which water is still being drawn. Kids went fishing or ice skating on it. I was never allowed to go down there because kids always drowned. It was about six feet deep. I did my swimming at Collins Park.

## **Ethnic Food**

*Barb*

I lived on Pickle Road in Oregon with my parents. My father made what we called Sunday Soup, or "Hunky" Soup. We were raised on soup. One week it was beef; one week it was chicken.

*Don*

In the summertime, it was vegetable because everyone grew succulent vegetables in their gardens. If it was a birthday, we might have roast duck. There are pictures of us turning jowl bacon over an open fire in the summertime, when it was very hot. They always said that is how you could tell summer was coming, when the Hungarians start turning bacon. I don't know why it is called "Hunky Turkey;" it is not turkey. It is jowl bacon with fresh vegetables. Summertime meant bacon. We learned to prepare the foods by watching our parents who watched their parents.

## **Our Home**

*Don* Because it was so long and narrow, our home on Consaul Street looked like an apartment in back of the bar. During the fifties, Dad remodeled the downstairs bathroom. The bar is from the 1800s. The building we lived in actually started out as three apartments. The bar was downstairs in front. There are all these little rooms in this building. We rented out the top front apartment which was over the bar. We kept the back upstairs as our bedrooms and then the downstairs as our living and dining, kitchen and bathrooms. This had been my father's home that he shared with his brothers and sisters. There were sometimes three different families living in this building at one time. What we knew as our pantry, used to be our Uncle Joe's bedroom. It had a severely sloping ceiling so he could not have been that tall.

## **Language**

*Barb* Hungarian was always spoken in the home but our parents did not formally teach it to us. My parents never taught us because they would use it when they argued. That way we never knew what they were talking about. However, I was always able to pick out a few words here and there. My aunts and uncles would start talking in English and then when it came to the punch-line or the point of the story, they would tell it in Hungarian. Mom would rattle off one word in English and one in Hungarian. We could never understand how she did it.

*Don* Our grandparents spoke "broken English", so their children were always more comfortable speaking Hungarian.

## **Opportunities in Birmingham**

*Barb* By the time my generation graduated high school and college, not only did we leave the neighborhood, we also began leaving the state! We went wherever our work took us.

*Don* There was work for our parents in Birmingham. They owned their own businesses, which were handed down from families, so generation after generation stayed in the neighborhood. They had transportation, so they could have traveled to work, but work was right there in the

neighborhood. Our father's generation had to go elsewhere to find work, so they started leaving the neighborhood. The economy has changed the structure of neighborhoods like Birmingham, perhaps forever.





# John Oravec

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*Interviewed by Joyce Hutchinson*

When I was a child, I was transferred by the court system into my sister's care. My mother died when I was two and my father died when I was nine. I had a stepmother, but my sister did not approve of the way she let me run around in the streets. I am glad my sister made that move because if she had not, I do not know where I would be today. When I transferred schools, I had to be held back a year because my grades were too low. When I did graduate, I was in the eighth grade. After graduation, my brother found a job for me, which wound up lasting for forty-two years. While I was living with my sister, she took care of me and made sure that I wasn't hanging out with gangs. She made me do housework and kept me busy because she had three children of her own.

My parents, Elizabeth and Steven Oravec, were born in Hungary. They came to the United States in 1906. When they came over my brother and sister, who were born in Hungary, were two and eight years old. I was born at 16 Magyar Street, which used to be called Blue Lane. It was just one lane as it is now. I was born in 1913. For my first four years of school, I attended Saint Stephen's and for the other five years, I went to Holy Rosary.

I had good memories of Holy Rosary School. At Saint Stephen's, the teachers and administrators did not do anything when students would skip. My stepmother didn't seem to be doing anything about it either. That is why my sister wanted to enroll me at Holy Rosary. I don't think discipline was very strict at Saint Stephen's. Father Hernady hollered a lot, but that was the extent of it. Schools today have more discipline than they did in my day. The students are probably the same today as they were in the past, not wanting to work or pay attention to the teachers.

My stepmother fed me, but she didn't really pay much attention to me beyond that. My brother went into the army to get out of the situation. He enlisted when he was only fifteen years old. When the military discovered that he was underage, they kicked him out. However, he re-enlisted with the same cavalry unit when he turned eighteen.

Later, we had a two-bedroom house on Burger Street. I remember my brother and I had to sleep in the attic which was not heated. My stepmother and stepsister slept together and my dad had the other bedroom. I remember my dad in our backyard on Burger Street. We had an extra lot alongside our house and a fairly large yard in the back. Dad raised chickens and poppyseed and also had a sizable vegetable garden too. He always loved the garden and I remember he had a big fruit cellar in the backyard which he made out of brick. It had a roof over it and it kept his vegetables in shape all winter long. After my brother went into the Army, I slept with my dad. I was sleeping with him the night that he died. I found him in the morning when I woke up.

## **Prohibition**

Prohibition occurred in the 1920s. While at Saint Stephen's, I used to skip school often. We would hang out on the corner of Consaul and Burger Street by Snear's Meat Market, or across the street by Kiss's Grocery Store. It wasn't hard for us to get booze. I know when I was about twelve, I used to act as a look out for a group of guys who smuggled liquor. Later on, when I was about twelve, my brother-in-law had a bar. He had been a bartender for a couple of other places and then he bought his own place on Caledonia Street, near Craig Street.

We lived in the middle of the block and the bar was on the corner. My brother had people bring booze to our house. We hid beer and Canadian whiskey under my bed. Our basement was half dirt and half concrete. It was up to me to hide certain bottles of liquor in different places in the dirt and when my brother wanted them, he would call home and ask me to bring the various bottles to the bar.

No federal agents bothered us, except one time when they chased us. I was with some guy and we were coming back from picking up some alcohol and the "Feds" were chasing us on Lake Erie. We had a substantial lead on them though. The suppliers had a garage right off of the lake and they just pulled the boat right into this garage where we could unload. But when the "Feds" were chasing us, the driver of the boat did not want to get caught and he said, "The next time I make a turn, you just roll backwards and fall into the water." So I rolled into the water and had a mile or so to swim to shore. He drove away because the Feds didn't see me roll out of the boat. The water was not very deep, so it wasn't so bad.

Another time, when we were anchoring our boat, there was a suspicious man there who gave us some lip. The man who was steering our boat hit the man across the

mouth with the butt of a shot gun and knocked out a couple of his teeth. But that was it; they just beat him up a little. They were nothing like the Mafia; they were just private citizens trying to make a living. My brother-in-law never had any trouble. Even his brother, the sheriff, knew about the bootlegging, but he never did anything about it.

## **Work**

I was about fifteen years old when I graduated from eighth grade. The next day, I started working at Sealtest. I had a special permit from the Board of Education. I was paying \$10.00 per week for room and board. The first couple of years after I graduated from school, I was just a flunky. Yet, after ten years, the boss wanted to know if I was interested in becoming a foreman. So, I was a foreman for thirty-two years. When Sealtest closed in 1970, I was sent to Detroit. I drove back and forth for nine months and I began falling asleep on the drive home since I was working nights. Also, as I was coming home, the sun would hit the car and warm it up and make me sleepy. I went off the highway twice. So I told them I was quitting.

They wanted me to move up to Detroit. I said "no." I did not want to move up there. That place was bad then and it is only getting worse. Then they suggested that I rent myself a room up there during the week so I could come home on the weekends. I said, "If I move up there and work, you know what will happen. I would get bored staying in my room and I would start going out to the bars and pretty soon I would end up in trouble." I said, "I better just quit and stay here."

When I quit Sealtest, I retired. I took the pension, but it wasn't paying very well. After three months, I noticed I was digging into my savings. I went to Page Dairy and asked if they had any openings and they told me about a foreman's job that was coming up. I did not want to be a foreman again, I just wanted to be a worker. I got a worker position and kept it for three years until they closed at which time I got into the canteen service. In the canteen service, I went to buildings all over town. They had several routes and they gave me the Medical College. There were four buildings I had to service in the morning and after lunch. The man who was in charge was a single fellow and he managed the business very poorly. When I had been there for about six months, I started making good money because I was on commission and everybody began to notice that I had potential, so the union started to declare, "That is a union job!" (When I was hired, I did not know that it was a union job. They simply had an opening and I took it).



There is a Catholic School up in Monroe that I delivered to—that was interesting. I remember one day there were a couple of rowdy kids there and the priest told the kids to slow down and be quiet. One of the boys became insubordinate and so the priest “decked” him. I learned later on that this priest had been a boxer before he got into the priesthood. He knew how to take care of himself; he didn’t put up with any backtalk.

## **Dating/ Social Life**

My wife was from the East Side, right off of Starr Avenue. Her name was Ann Schemenauer and she graduated from Waite High School in 1931. Her father was a housing contractor/builder. She was English and German. We met at a dance at the yacht club which was right across the street from Riverside Park.

When I was young and started working, I was going out every night because in those days we had dances in all the surrounding small towns like Genoa, Fremont, Angola and Ironville. There were dance halls in Toledo and we had the yacht club and the recreation center. On Monday nights, we went to the Trianon, which used to be on Madison and 17th, located across from the Toledo Club. We could barely squeeze in on that dance floor—the place was packed. We could always meet someone there. My buddy had a Ford Roadster and I had a Mercury Roadster and we had rumble seats. We could pick up girls.

## **Wedding**

We went out for about one year when my wife was living with her parents and then we were married in 1932. Mine was just a simple wedding. It was in the church rectory at Sacred Heart Church. We had a private wedding in 1932. We were married 55 years and then my wife died in 1987. In those days, we got married and had families and worked and that was it.

## **Home Brew and Hungarian Cooking**

Our first apartment was on the corner of Dearborn and Starr, right around the corner from my mother-in-law. I used to make home brew down in her basement. A friend of mine used to work for Tiedtke’s and he would get me malt from there. Our apartment had a door which led out from the kitchen onto a flat roof. We used to go out there and drink beer and listen to the music that they would play across the street. I still have the crock from that great home brew we used to make. We always had a



batch cooking and I still have some bottles left. We would cook home brew for ourselves and wonderful homemade root beer for the kids.

I remember having liver and rice Hungarian sausage when my dad would get a pig. He would get together with the neighbors and they would kill it, cut it up and butcher it and then would make lard and put the meat in crocks. Later on we used a butcher shop and meat markets. Things have changed. Although the National Bakery is still there, along with a restaurant where you can still get some authentic Hungarian cooking.

## **Youth and Inflation**

When I was a child, we used to hang out on corners. We weren't in gangs, we just gathered in small groups of friends who would congregate on different corners. We seldom had words with other groups. One time, however, a few of us were going to a show across the street. We first stopped in the candy store next door. Three guys were coming our way and one thing led to another and pretty soon, we were in a fight. Back then, we fought with our fists and then the next week we would see the same guys again and we would say, "Well, hi buddy!" And that would be that. We didn't hold grudges or carry knives or guns like some young people do today. It was a different world.

We would meet at the corners because there was nothing to do inside our homes. We didn't have radios or televisions, so we went down to the corners to talk with our buddies all night long. I vividly remember one instance when it was starting to get cold outside. I only had a light jacket and my brother was on leave from the Army and he came over and saw me and I started shaking. He asked, "Where is your coat?" I said, "It's at home." He had a fleece lined Army jacket that he put around my shoulders and he said, "Warm up a little bit and you better get on home." Little things like that stay with me.

I think kids today have a more difficult time. My sister used to give me dimes to go see the movies across the street every Sunday. We could see two shows. I would stop relatives and friends of the family on the way every Sunday to ask for nickels. Then I would stop in the candy store and buy a quarter pound of Boston Beans which only cost one nickel and would last all day. Things were much cheaper back then.

When I got married, my wife had a budget of \$7.00 per week for groceries. She could buy pork chops for twenty-five cents per pound and milk was nineteen cents

per quart. When I first started working, I made \$25.00 per week and after that, I made \$32.50 a week. We got by though. I rented an apartment and everything. We didn't have to use credit. We would buy one thing, pay for it in full, then, if money was left, we would buy something else.

## **Holidays**

I remember Christmas when men from Saint Stephen's use to go around to the homes as devils and we would tease them. They would parade around different streets every night during the holidays, scaring kids with a wooden ax. They would come into our homes and ask for donations. Easter and the other holidays, I don't recall as clearly. We had picnics on the Fourth of July, that was about it. We used to have our own, family baseball or football games. We had enough fellows to play without a problem.

## **Injury/Military Service**

I never served in the military because I have a spine that is fused. It is solid from my hip to my neck. This began occurring around the time of World War II, so I was classified as 4F. It was working from one vertebrae up to another and I couldn't move my hip. I had troubles all of the time with my spine. Even today, I have to move my whole upper body at the same time because my spine is one, solid piece up to my neck. I have no movement in my spine.

## **Friends and Activities**

I did not belong to any organizations. Now, I belong to the Eagles. After I was married, we used to have friends over to play cards during the week. Then, on Saturday nights, we would go square dancing at a special place up in Michigan. We had five couples in a group. We always had one spare couple just in case one of the couples couldn't make it. If all five showed up, then one couple would take turns. That way we could always have our own group. We had a lot of fun that way.

Once a month we would have dinners at our houses. We would rotate among the couples and at the dinners we would also play cards. I am only in touch with one of my old dancing friends. Most of them are deceased but there is still one woman I am in contact with. Back then, she was married to a wrestler, but they got a divorce and she remarried. Now she is a widow. Other than her, when we broke up, we all went our separate ways.

## **Oravec Family Research**

There are different Oravec families I have found but they aren't related. Steven Oravec works for the city as an engineer and every once in awhile, I see his name in the paper but he is not a relative. I have more relatives from my brother-in-law, John Becker, than from my own family. My brother-in-law had five brothers. One was a sheriff; one worked in a dairy; and three were bootleggers. He also had three sisters.

I am glad that my grandson, Thomas Birely, is working on the family history because I tried it years ago and became frustrated with it because I was working and didn't have much time. He has more time and more of an interest in it. I had two brothers of my own who both died during infancy. Tom found out that they were six months old, which I didn't know.

As I have mentioned earlier, both of my parents died when I was a child. I never knew whether I had any aunts or uncles. I haven't found any yet. If I do, they are most likely back in the old county which is what makes the search so difficult.

## **Final Thoughts**

My advice to young people is to keep their noses clean. If they can maintain stable jobs then they will be able to have the things in life that they want. Stable industry and hard working people is what has made Birmingham such a special place.

When I lived there I thought it was a fine place to live and we didn't seem to have a lot of troubles like crime. It was a very family oriented place. Its sense of community was demonstrated a few years ago when the city wanted to build an overpass on Consaul Street. The people of Birmingham put a stop to it because they didn't want to increase traffic and they felt that the busy road would isolate residents on the other side of the overpass. Everything has changed, but there are still some older people over there who have really stuck together and are working very hard to preserve its unique heritage.





# Paul John Slovak

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*Interviewed by Corey Slovak, his son*

I was born on July 21st, 1930 in Toledo, Ohio. I have four sisters: Sue (deceased), Lydia, Ann, and Helen. I grew up in the Birmingham section of East Toledo at 508 Craig Street. Birmingham was mainly composed of Hungarian, Czechoslovakian, Italian, German, and Polish residents. My parents owned a neighborhood bar, at the same address, called Slovak's Cafe where I worked until I graduated from high school. During World War II, the Cafe boomed. The Coast Guard sailors from the shipyard brought us a good deal of business. When the sailors couldn't make it to the restaurant my father and sister Sue would take soup and sandwiches over to the docks. We had our own little delivery service which was very much appreciated.

We also had a friendly rivalry with Tony Packo's restaurant. My mother made Hungarian hot dogs with a homemade relish sauce. I always thought ours was the best, even though, I must admit, I have never tried a Tony Packo's dog. Besides, the Tony Packo dog can not really be considered a true Hungarian hot dog because they use Polish sausage.

## Prohibition

One of my favorite stories is when my father used to bootleg whiskey out of the bar. He would make the whiskey, put it into two gallon jugs, wrap the jugs in newspaper, and give them to Sue and Ann to hide in their school bags. This was done to avoid the Federal Officers, who were constantly watching the house and the bar.

After school, the girls would take the street car and get off at Pearson Park. Then Dad would go pick up the whiskey and deliver it to his customers. (He usually left the girls at the park until after he made his deliveries.) The only problem was, he had this habit of forgetting about the girls because he would get involved in card games. So, there were many times when the girls would be left at the park until after midnight, when Mom would remind him that he did have four daughters instead of just two. Finally, he would go to pick them up.

## Training

I attended Birmingham Elementary School. Then, I went to Waite High School for one year and Macomber for three years. At that time, students were required to go to regular high school for one year before they were allowed to take the test to enter vocational school. While at Macomber, I majored in mechanical drafting. After graduating, I attended Bowling Green State University, where I majored in Fine Arts and Industrial Arts. After I graduated from BGSU, in 1953, I went into the Army.

During basic training, I was a tank driver. I always thought that was exciting. After basic training, I was transferred to Louisville, Kentucky, where my duty was to draw and make aerial outlines for the Army and Air Force.

## Professional Life

Upon leaving the Army, I started teaching at Washington Jr. High in the Washington Local School System. I taught there for five years and then moved on to Whitmer High School where I stayed for thirty-two years. While at Whitmer, I started teaching ceramics, and drawing. Then, the opportunity arose to teach mechanical drawing, which I gladly accepted.

I became the set designer and director for the school musicals at Whitmer. My first show, in 1961, was *Once Upon a Mattress*. My last, in 1980, was *The Sound of Music*. While at Whitmer, I directed a total of eighteen musicals which included: *The Pajama Game*, *Kiss Me Kate*, *Brigadoon*, *Oliver*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Carnival*, *Hello Dolly*, *Funny Girl* and my favorite, which we performed in 1976. James Bonkowski, a former student, grew up to become a performer on Broadway. Many other former students have gone on to musical careers in Toronto, Detroit, Cleveland, and San Francisco.

The most memorable moment I had as director was during our performance of *The Sound Of Music*. The boys who were responsible for raising and lowering the drops from the flyspace were messing around and not paying attention. One of the drops was a set of columns about twelve feet high and made of card board. The kids lost control of the ropes and the columns came crashing to the floor and fell into the orchestra pit. The kids came running out to remove the columns. No one was hurt, and the orchestra never missed a beat! The funny thing was, those in the audience who had never seen the show, thought it was a part of the act. Thirteen years later, I am now able to chuckle about the whole thing.

After retiring in 1985, to keep busy, I worked on stage sets for Saint Francis, Saint John's, Central Catholic, Oak Harbor, the Toledo Ballet, and the Cassandra Ballet. I also do some directing for the Oregon Community Theater. The one thing that I would love to do is be able to build a set for a musical with no budget limits and have a nice theater in which to perform. I would go crazy and spend all kinds of money. It is almost scary to think of how good it would be.

***Side note by Corey Slovak***

*Paul is known throughout the area as one of the best, if not the best set designer around. (Although he will not admit it.)*

## **Other Interests**

I enjoy traveling, going to see professional musical productions, and baking. I have traveled to thirty of the fifty states. My favorite locations to drive through are the Dakotas, Utah, the Rockies, and down to the Grand Canyon and Santa Fe. Before I was married, I used to travel to New York to see Broadway shows. I still go to Detroit and Toronto to see them. Some of my favorites are: *Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Miserables*, *Big River*, *Will Roger's Follies*, and *Barnum*.

***End Note by Cory Slovak***

*Within the past three to four years, my father, Paul, has developed a baking business he calls "Sweet Somethings" in order to supplement his teachers' pension. He runs it out of his home and it has become quite popular.*

*He makes cookie bouquets, Slovakian pastries, and nut coffee cakes. Most people say, though, that he would make just about anything if he was asked nicely enough. Sometimes, some of the old Hungarian ladies from the East Side will call him and order cookies by the hundreds so they don't have to bake them themselves. During the holidays, especially Christmas, things get really crazy. The last couple of years, he has had to bake well over 4,000 cookies and close to 50 coffee cakes each Christmas. The chore begins at 7:00 a.m. and he bakes all day until midnight for two weeks straight. Everything is made from scratch and he takes great pride in his baking. It pays off because he really makes some great stuff.*

## **Final Thoughts**

There have really been some incredible experiences. Although there were many times when I wanted to give two certain boys a good swift kick in the rear, I would not trade the past twenty-two years for anything. It has made me a better person.





# William Szabo

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*Interviewed by John Ahern*

## **Birmingham Origins**

Birmingham, an ethnic part of the City of Toledo, is on a point of the Great Lakes about midway between the oil and coal fields of Pennsylvania and the rich iron ore deposits of the Mesabi and Gogebic iron ranges in northern Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. Toledo was a natural setting for metal industries which needed workers. This need brought an influx of immigrants from Europe to Toledo and the general area. Birmingham, being on the point of the lake, and on the Maumee River, was an ideal location for steel and manufacturing industries. An iron producing blast furnace, The Interlake Iron Co., was located in Birmingham to produce pig iron which was later refined into steel. Next door to the Interlake Iron Co. was a coke producing plant to provide coke, the fuel for the blast furnace. During the day the coke plant produced immense white clouds of vapor looking like thunderclouds in the sky. These white clouds resulted when the smoldering coke was quenched with water. When the molten iron was tapped out of the bottom of the blast furnace the night sky lit up with a bright orange glow.

Further upstream, about a mile, was a boat manufacturing installation called The Toledo Ship Building Co., where they built large, lake vessels or “barges”, as we used to call them. Even further upstream from it was a mill, The National Milling Co., and the National Malleable, a malleable steel casting company. Many of the people inhabiting Birmingham worked there. Most of the people were from Hungary and the population density was very high. Homes normally designed to house families of five contained up to fifteen inhabitants. Many of these people were boarders who rented the rooms to be close to the metal industries at which they worked.

Let me reflect a little about Birmingham. The community of Birmingham was probably named after Birmingham, England, another metal production area. Birmingham was sort of a complete community unit. On the perimeter were the workplaces. Inside the perimeter were the workers’ homes and there was hardly a corner on a block that hadn’t a store, a bakery, a butcher shop, a saloon or a dry

goods store. There were many butcher shops and grocery butcher shops - almost one in every block. There were, in my memory, three clothing stores: Tarczali's, Chicago Bargain House, and Kolibar's. Then, there was one bakery in the middle of the community, which is still there, The National Bakery. It is not run by the same people anymore, but the building and bakery are still functioning.

One could survive only by speaking Hungarian. I still speak it fluently and can write it and read it as well. When my father got started in the grocery-butcher business, he went to the upper end of the community, closer to the Interlake Iron Co. on Brough Street. He had a store built there with a beautiful, white, brick front. It was on the edge of the Slovak community. (He was kind of on the border between the purely Hungarian community and the Slovaks). There was a smattering of Italians on York Street. The store was on the corner of Brough and Bakewell; just a block off York Street. He didn't speak Slovak, but the ladies went to this store anyway.

## **Family**

My grandfather emigrated from Hungary and settled in Birmingham. Gregory Szabo came alone, hoping to earn money to send back to Hungary, so the rest of the family could follow. He had four daughters and one son, my father, John. Later on, my father came to the United States as a teenager. They were together for a short time, but Grandpa got lonely and went back to the family in Hungary. He never came back to the U.S. My father stayed here and never went back to Hungary. He was here alone and resided at Joseph and Elizabeth Kis' boarding house. Joseph and Elizabeth Kis were my mother Mary's parents. Romance started and they got married at St. Stephen's Church.

My father worked at the blast furnace for awhile and then he went to the National Malleable. My grandparents lived next door to us. They were situated between our place and Petro's Saloon on Genesee Street, which still stands, although it is no longer a saloon.

## **Mother**

My mother was a very intelligent woman. She was not formally educated, but I have yet to meet anybody who surpasses her in terms of intelligence. She was a great "pusher" for business. To encourage the children with business and educational goals, she used to read to us books about Andrew Carnegie, the steel magnate. She would dictate quotations from the book to us. She was educationally oriented

because she came from a university town in Europe called Sarospatak (meaning Muddy Creek), and also, she came from a family of educators. Many of them were professors at the local university. She always told us that without education, we would be disadvantaged in life.

She was a Protestant, so my parents had a “mixed marriage”. She had to convert to Catholicism so that they could get married at St. Stephen’s. We had a joke about their reception. We used to ask Mom where she went on her honeymoon. She would reply, “I went home and changed clothing. The reception was in the basement of the church, and after it was over, I went home and changed and went back to wash the dishes from the reception. That was our honeymoon!”

My mother used to wash white shirts for us boys, thirty-two shirts in all, and she hand ironed them for us to wear when we would go out. Before we went on dates she would say, “Come here before you leave,” and she would check us to see if our ties were on correctly and she would examine our collars.

She cooked Hungarian foods, like fried chicken, roast ham, pork chops, more pork meats and soups. She cooked chicken paprikash with sour cream gravy. The gravy is made of the juice from the cooking chicken and then she added sour cream and starch so that it would thicken. I had chicken paprikash quite often on the farm. My mother would buy a thousand baby chicks in the spring to raise as a meat supply for the family. When it was lunchtime, each day, she would tell me to catch twelve of the chickens and kill them for her to use for supper. We had meat almost every day. In those days, a man farmed with two teams or horses and his sons. He didn’t have all the machinery that, thank God, we have today.

## **Religion**

Later in life, my mother began to practice Protestantism once again. Since she would attend Protestant services and was very active in her faith life, my father began to go along with her. I am a devout Catholic, but in those ancient dark days, it was like the Inquisition. About religion, my mother would always say, “Son, we are all God’s people.”

Over at St. Stephen’s the church bells were rung when someone died and at noon and six at night. They were also rung at the Consecration during the ten o’clock Mass. I discovered the reason for this practice while in the U.S. Army in Europe. Both the men working out in the field and men at home would be able to know what was



going on at Mass so they could say a little silent prayer. It happens in Birmingham to this day.

Eating meat was forbidden during Lent. Other times, it was forbidden only on Fridays. We could not eat meat on Fridays until midnight and when we had card games or parties on Friday nights, everyone would be watching the clock for the arrival of midnight. At midnight, the food was served.

## **Weddings**

In terms of weddings, in the early days of the community, the people did as much as they could for the couples. They had festivities, but it wasn't until later, when the community became well established, that they had the means to have large weddings. In the beginning, they couldn't take too much time off from their work. I didn't marry a Hungarian girl and my parents didn't pay for the wedding. We were married at Saint Teresa's. My wife is both German and French.

The elderly women in Birmingham used to come and see my mother due to the fact that she had five single sons. They would come by and say that they knew the right girl for her son. And when it dawned on them that I was getting married to a girl from outside the community, hence, not Hungarian, they were astonished. They said "Bill, how can you do such a thing?" But my family was not the kind of family that would place those types of restrictions upon choosing a marriage partner. We were married in 1947.

## **Hungarian Turkey (Szalona Sutes)**

Hungarian Turkey, which means, "to fry bacon," was done by my family and not only on the holidays. We did it in the summer time when we had good weather and particularly on the farm where we had the makings for it. There didn't seem to be any regular pattern for it; we did it whenever we felt like doing so. When I was in Europe, in WWII, we captured a lot of Hungarian soldiers and I interrogated them. We were talking about the frying of bacon and how it came into practice and one soldier explained that Hungary is the Great Plains of Europe and shepherds and cowboys and the drovers that watched the horse and cattle herds didn't have any refrigeration. Bacon fat was cured and short of hanging it in the summer sun, it was impossible to destroy the stuff. They would have little onion and vegetable gardens out there on the plains where they were herding livestock and put the bacon on sticks. I don't know why it's called "turkey" here in the United States.



At home, each summer, all of our neighbors (and they weren't all Hungarians), came pouring out to participate, and they loved it. My neighbor, whose father, Frank Ulrich, was heavily involved in starting Food Town, loves to participate in Sutes. We fry the bacon until it's down to a "nubbin" and the fat is out of it and then we cut the "nubbin" off the skin. Even our women know how to do it. It tastes like cracklings and I have never heard of anyone refusing it once they have tasted it with the onions, green peppers and tomatoes. My wife was surprised at how much she liked it when she first tasted it. Andy, my twelve-year-old grandson, has fried it and also eats it. My granddaughter, Meredith, loves it too. My four daughters know how to fry it, but usually, it is just the men who fry the bacon while the women do everything else.

### **Dousing (Ontozes)**

Dousing ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous. As early as teenagers, we would start at home and sprinkle Mom with a little perfumed water. Dad would mix it and we would sprinkle Mom and wish her well. Elsewhere, guys would get rough and push the women under pumps and pour buckets of water over them. In this way, it varied from the tame to the outrageous. Sprinkling is like the blessing water used at Mass. Girls didn't resent it because we sprinkled them very lightly. There were some characters, though, that thought it meant more to do it by the bucket full than with nice little sprinkles. We would sprinkle Mom, or our aunts, or our cousins, or the neighbor girl and then they would give us a colored egg or an Easter pastry. This was a compliment. I was gone most of the time at Purdue University and the Army, so I only participated as a young person. I never liked to see the rough stuff though. We didn't separate the pretty girls from the others. I imagine that some did, but I never realized that it was subject to consideration. My mother soft-toned us in behavior. She explained that people were not dousing for the reason it was originally intended and they were not being polite about it. She was very strict about good behavior.

When I was married, I sprinkled lightly. It was reversed on Easter Tuesday when the girls could then go after the boys. There were girls who were polite, and then there were girls who grabbed the boys and brought buckets of water and drenched them. About the time of WWII, the practice died. My boys and girls never doused. But I like anything that they are involved in which serves as a memorial to their heritage.

## Business Endeavors

When I was seven or eight years old, I used to go to the gateway of the National Malleable Company and the workers would bring their three-pint, enamel buckets to the gate so that I could go get some beer for them. They would then give me six cents. I had all these little buckets that I would take over to our neighbors, the Petros. Mrs. Petros would fill them with beer and charge me a nickel a bucket, and then I would make a penny profit. After filling the buckets, I would walk about 150 yards to the gateway and the guys would be waiting for their cold beer. I was an entrepreneur; I was a beer broker or a beer baron.

This was in the summer time and they had a very hot job pouring molten iron into molds. These whiskered guys with old-fashioned mustaches and sweat-soaked clothing would be waiting for their buckets of cold beer. I was born in 1913 and didn't know anything about the laws. I just walked into Petro's with the buckets and they filled them and I delivered them to the guys. I believe there was no regulation on doing so at the time. They would sweat out that bucket of beer in minutes.

Their job was to make molds from the patterns in sand in mold boxes. Then, after they made the mold, they took the patterns out of the molds and put the mold back together. When they had their quota of molds made, they had to go to the furnace where the molten metal was pouring into ladles. Each man would have to pour his own molds with that red-hot molten metal. There wasn't much of an attempt made in those days to comfort the workers. It was, "Survive or get out of the way!"

The Helms used to own our house in Birmingham and they were very involved with the National Malleable. It was years later that my folks sold the building and we went to farm in Dundee, Michigan. They returned to Birmingham four years later. Dad was a good farmer, but he didn't know farming economics. My parents were in and out of the grocery business three times.

I was a pretty good-looking boy, according to my mother, and the movies were really getting a lot of attention. My mother and Aunt Elizabeth Kis took me out to Hollywood and I got into a few films. I even saw one later at the old Temple Theater in downtown Toledo. It was the first talking picture to hit Toledo. I was a young boy then and my part in the film was to be the big brother to a girls who was the head of the family after her parents had died. A villain was foreclosing on the homestead and I was supposed to comfort my sister. She was a nice looking girl, older than I was, and I had to kiss her to comfort her. That was poison to me at that age, so the

movies never worked out. When the news got around Birmingham the kids nicknamed me “movie actor.” As I look back on this treatment I received, I never got over the hurt for having had the nerve to try. My mother consoled me and told me to keep trying.

## **Schooling**

I was at St. Stephen’s while in second grade and then I transferred to Birmingham School. The public school children walked on one side of the street going to Birmingham School and on the other side of the street were the Catholic school kids going to St. Stephen’s. We were going counter current. We would holler across the street, “Catholics! Catholics go to Hell!” and they would holler back across, “Public Schools! Public Schools go to Hell!” This was despite the fact that about half of the children attending the public schools were Catholic.

## **School Days at Birmingham School**

I remember Mr. Matanyi who was the janitor and for recess he had a brass bell to ring at the end of the play period. It was a privilege to ring the bell. He would pick out a good boy at recess whom he would allow to ring the bell that day. Mrs. Graether was the principal, a very fine elderly woman. Most of the children at Birmingham were Hungarian, so there wasn’t much prejudice there.

Szabo translates into “tailor.” When I was on the farm in Dundee, I found myself in a German-Scotch community and I was called a “hunky” even by the teachers. It hurt because I was the highest ranking student in the school. There was a teacher who would pat me on the shoulder and tell me not to worry. They were prejudiced against me because I was Hungarian. Later, in the military service, there was a mixture of ethnic groups, so prejudice didn’t really exist.

I didn’t graduate from Birmingham School. I was in Dundee, Michigan. From there, we went to Culver City, California and I graduated from the eighth grade there. We came back to Birmingham and I graduated from high school at Waite. I was out of school for five years and during those years, we were out on the farm in Clay Center, Ohio, I worked on the farm for five years, but then my mother started urging me to return to school.

I enrolled at Purdue University in 1936. I was twenty-three years old as a freshman and was older than the seniors. I graduated before WWII began. I had to be in the



ROTC program, which was required of all qualifying male students. I was very proficient in military affairs, so they asked me to take the last two years of school to become an officer.

After graduation, I worked for General Motors and had an extremely high-paying job. I had tremendous possibilities ahead of me. I was running half of the Chevrolet Plant on Central Avenue as a cub engineer. I was doing this when the war began. In 1941, my number came up in the draft. I was single and the plant manager said, "Bill, we are doing war production, I can get you deferred very easily." I told him "no" because I felt that I owed it to my country and I thought it would only be a year. That was in April of 1941. I got in and was soon commissioned. After December 7, 1941 (Pearl Harbor), everyone's plans of serving for only one year vanished.

## **After World War II**

When I returned from Germany after the war, I returned to my position with the Chevrolet Plant. I worked there until the spring of 1946. It was an amazingly promising and highly paying job. But I didn't enjoy being inside with the machinery, so my brother and I started talking about building houses. There was a great demand for houses and we had both saved our money. I was very frugal during the war. I used to give haircuts for two bits in the woods to soldiers sitting on stumps. With my General Motors and World War II pay, I had enough money to get started in the building business. My brother and I bought a couple of lots by Inverness Country Club in the Mount Vernon Addition. We built the homes and before they were completed, they were sold!

I was single and living with my parents. One day a woman came to the door wanting to buy one of the houses we were building. I was half-dressed with a towel thrown around my shoulders and she pleaded, "Please sell that house to me, mister, please sell it to me!" I reminded her that she did not even know what the asking price was. She didn't care; she just wanted that house. I built over a thousand houses. We studied what the market wanted. In West Toledo, ranch houses were the new thing. We studied the design and bought ground in Eastmoreland Plat II. We put the streets in, as well as all the utilities and built all the houses. I designed probably 95% of them.

I did not benefit from the fact that I was Hungarian. In fact, my mother and father still lived in Birmingham and a lot of people would stop and complement them on what a fine job their sons were doing. But still, they wouldn't buy from us.



## **Military Service**

In WWII, I served in Europe in the Army with the rank of Captain as the “Order of Battle Officer” in the Sixth Armored Division in General Patton’s Third Army. I landed in Normandy after the invasion in early July, 1941. Our division was in combat for 242 days and I earned five battle stars for the battles of Normandy, mid France, the Ardennes, Bastogne Battle of the Bulge and Germany. My job was to identify and evaluate the combat effectiveness of the enemy divisions on our division front. One day near the end of the Battle of the Bulge I hit the jackpot by identifying elements of five different Waffen S.S. Divisions on our Division front. The German Army really wanted Bastogne but they could not capture it.

Our parents at home suffered with four service stars in the window of our home. My brother John was in the 30th Infantry Division which was very heavily engaged against the Germans in Mortain, France. At the same time, General Patton’s Third Army was encircling and largely destroying a large part of the German forces in the Falais Pocket with terrific participation of the U.S. Army Air Forces. My three brothers, John, Julius, and Alfred, and I, survived the war without a scratch, thank God.

One of the many unpleasant memories of the war was the capture and liberation by our division of the German concentration camp at Buchenwald, Germany. We could smell it sometimes before we saw the horror of it. How can man be so cruel to man?

## **Final Thoughts**

The above statements deal with Birmingham and life there a long time ago and also some of the personal events of my lifetime. Much more could be told about all the places I have been and about all of the events I have experienced during my lifetime, but it would sound as if I were a second Huckleberry Finn. I cherish my Hungarian heritage and I love Hungarian music and food.



# Steve Tarczali

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*Julia Kaduk Tarczali*

The Tarczali family originally lived in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. They immigrated from Szin, Hungary. The men, Steve Tarczali and his son, Steve, both worked as butchers in Johnstown. They had heard of better opportunities, so they came to Birmingham. They owned the house called the “Novak House” in the 1900 block of Bakewell.

The men worked at a factory on Front Street. The younger Steve handled the hot metallic parts, burning his fingertips each day. His grandmother wrapped them each day so that he could go to work. They wanted their own business, so they built the building at 1957 Bakewell Street. It is across from the Magyar Evangelical Reformed Church, now the Calvin United Church of Christ.

They had a dry goods store. They sold men’s suits, shoes, and clothing for the entire family. They extended credit to customers and when the Depression hit, they could not collect their debts. They converted the store to an ice cream parlor, which operated until World War II, when both of the Steve Tarczalis passed away.

The grandson, Steve Paul Tarczali, enlisted with John Erni, his childhood friend, on the last day of enlistment in 1941. They both trained at the Aeronautical Institute in New York City. Steve served in England, France, and Germany. He promised his new wife, Julia Kaduk, that he would show her those countries someday.

We were married February 11, 1946. The Reformed Church had been remodeled and dedicated on Sunday, February 10. Weddings usually took place on Saturdays, but we were married on Monday afternoon. Our reception took place at the John Virag Gypsy Camp. It was a two-story building. Dinner was downstairs in the restaurant. There was a place upstairs for big Hungarian wedding receptions. There was a stage there where P’al Javor, a very famous Hungarian actor, performed. He toured the United States, presenting shows in Hungarian neighborhoods around the country. They were very good. I used to go with my mom. I just loved it.

At the receptions, a woman would beat on a pan and collect money for babies. Usually, the money was actually spent on the honeymoon and starting the bridal couple's new home.

When Steve returned from the Army/Air Force, he opened Tarczali's Confectionery Store. With three churches in the immediate area, it was a busy place. People stopped for banana splits, sundaes and sodas from the soda fountain. The store was open every day from 7:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. The family worked it because we were more likely to make a profit that way. Even extended families from out-of-state helped out when they visited. We lived behind the store. The apartments upstairs were rented to families and there was a dentist in the corner apartment.

Steve returned to the Air Force for the Korean War because he was still a reservist at the Cleveland Airport. Steve was stationed in Germany working on C-119 transports during the war. We sold the store to a widow with two children so that she could invest her insurance money and be with her children.

With the store and the livelihood gone, Steve enlisted for regular Air Force duty. He served in Greenville, South Carolina; Germany; Rapid City, South Dakota; Bunker Hill, Indiana; England; Lincoln, Nebraska, and Arizona. He served 26 and a-half years and retired in September, 1969.

In August of 1968, the British Parliament was in the process of passing legislation for foreign adoptions. May 5, 1969, we adopted a daughter, Paula Kay. Eight months later we adopted a son, Steve Emery. Paula has two daughters, Lindsay and Katherine, whose nickname is Kady in honor of the Kaduk's.



# Barbara (Priscsak) Torok

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*Interview by Dr. John Ahern*

I was born in 1907 at 1935 Genesee Street. My dad was a core maker who made patterns for metal parts. They did not have much education in Europe, so they learned what they did through experience. My dad was hardly ever out of a job; he went from one job to another. He supported seven children: six girls and a boy. I had two sisters. One died before I was born and one was a baby. She was named Barbara. She would have been two years older than me. The other sister passed away at age fourteen.

I was about sixteen at the time we bought our house. It was a big thing because we had to take out a loan and we would have to go to the bank each month to pay. We knew exactly how much we owed. When my mother died, we had very little money, maybe a couple hundred dollars. So, I drew that money out of the bank and I paid off the balance on the house. My father never took care of the family business. It was all done by the women. My dad was kind of worried that we would spend that money and I said, "No Dad, here is the bank book; the house is all paid for."

## **My Father's Death**

My dad was a strict Catholic. He was one of the founders of the Saint Stephen's Church. There were seven founders when he died. When parishioners died, they would just bury them without even saying a few words about the good things they had done. However, outstanding parishioners were eulogized. Because my dad was one of the founders, the Monsignor gave a great speech. He said it took men like my father to go collecting dimes and nickels (that is all people could afford) to get this church going. I was appointed to be a collector when they had the church repainted. The pastor appointed a male companion for me (which I didn't like—I thought maybe he was trying to match-make) and we went around collecting. Collecting and raising funds were my father's contributions to the founding of Saint Stephen's.

My dad never missed Sunday Mass. We lived near the church and he would get us up early in the morning. They had what they called a five o'clock Mass during Advent. When Dad would get us up in the morning, we were happy to go because it

was a thrill for us to go to Mass with my dad. After Mass, we would come home all dressed up and crawl back into bed until it was time to go to school.

When Pearl Harbor was attacked, my dad went to church the day before, December 6th. He went to early Mass on Saturday morning and he had a stroke in church. He was alone and the people carried him out and took him across the street to Kinsey's Funeral Parlor. Mrs. Vamos knocked at our door and said, "Come quick, your father got sick in church and he is at Kinsey's." He did not die, so we called Dr. McCarthy who told us to take him to the hospital. But because he was going to die anyway, we wondered why. Fifty-three years ago, we did not have hospitalization plans. He lingered at home for forty-eight hours.

My sister Katie lived across the street, so she came to help take care of him. He was unconscious. We called the priest and the doctor and they said there was nothing we could do. I had a candle burning for prayer in the bedroom. I went to church that morning, December 8th, and asked the priest in the sacristy to pray for my dad who was dying. He mentioned his name at Mass. When I came home, my father took his last breath.

My father seldom drank on weekdays. One Saturday night, he snuck out and was hit by a car on Consaul Street. He had broken a leg and landed in the hospital. We were at a dance at Saint Stephen's Hall and one of the neighbors came and said, "You better come home because your dad is hurt. They took us to Riverside Hospital. He had this big gash on his forehead and we didn't know whether we should love him or kill him.

## **Life in the Twenties**

People bootlegged then. There were half-pint bottles of whiskey that could be bought for a dime or a quarter. My dad would get that and he would drink it at home when he would come home from work on Friday. My mother used to make a home brew beer. We helped and hated making it. It was just like making homemade sauerkraut.

Our house was a mess because we used to butcher our pigs. The whole kitchen was full of blood and we hated pork. We hated that mess. I do not want to eat it, ever. I don't even want to think about all those things we had to eat. My husband was that way too. He said, "I will never eat what I had to eat at home, never."

We butchered pigs on the kitchen floor. Everybody did. A man in Whitehouse, Ohio, by the name of Ostofi, would sell hogs for butchering in homes. They would have a car or a truck and I don't know how they would manage it because they couldn't carry it. They would take knives and they would stab the pig right in the neck. There would be a slash right around the neck part and they would bring it home. My mother would spread a cloth on the floor and there was a bloody mess. She would make hark blood sausage with rice. I hated how it was made.

She emptied the guts. My sister, Mary, was good at home. I wasn't. I never touched the stuff. They would empty it, squeeze all that stuff out and then would wash it and blow it up to check for holes. On the kitchen floor, they would cut the parts out. They would cut the head parts, the four legs, and then they would take the guts out. My father did the cutting. My mother was there to take it and wash it and to do this and that and my sister, Mary helped. She couldn't see anything bad about it. (I never ate it and will not eat it to this day.)

They didn't have freezers then. My mother made sausage and we had a smoke house. Almost everyone had a smokehouse. If you didn't, you would use the neighbors'. We all helped each other out. We would smoke the meat and then hang it in a cold room or in the attic. The meat would just hang there and we would get so tired of eating it. My mother used to render her own lard in these huge crocks. We never bought butter or lard. If we needed shortening we were told to use the lard. She would fry the pork of the meat and she stored it in that lard. So that when she said, "I don't know what to cook for supper," we would go get some of that pork. She would warm it up and we would have that to eat.

We did not have bathrooms; we had outside johns. We had to scrub them every so often. That was a job! We took buckets of water and a broom and scrubbed the top so that it was cleaner than our kitchen.

## **Saturday Night**

When we were younger, my mother had a coal stove, like everyone else. We also had a washtub and we had to take turns bathing. Sometimes, we used the same water. The oldest children got to bathe first and we used to fight over who got to go next. If we splashed some of the water out, we had to replenish it. We had to wash up everyday, but taking a bath was only a "must" on Saturdays. Because all six of us had to bathe on Saturday, it was a very busy day.



We had nice “Sunday-go-meeting-dresses” that were all starched. Everybody wore starched clothes. Saturday was the day we pressed our dresses because we were going to wear them the next day. On Sundays, when we came home from church, we had to change into our ordinary clothes because we had to save those special dresses for church.

## Social Life

I used to love to go out and I was active in the neighborhood. I wasn’t a homebody. I am still active. My sisters would argue all the time, “Do you have to be there?” (It is killing me that I can’t be as active as I used to be.) We had parties, picnics, and parades. There were always “goings on” at the church. I belonged to the Rosary Altar Society. Whatever was going on in the neighborhood, I had to be there.

We had gatherings. It seemed like I was going all the time. I used to roller-skate and we used to walk down to Riverside Park. We would walk across the bridge. We would always find something to do. We would gather a bunch of kids together and play all sorts of games. My mother used to have a fit about this because all my sisters stayed home and were there to help her around the house. We argued, but I was not considered the black sheep because she loved me. We did argue about how I liked to go out, though.

Before the war, I was dating. We used to have dances at the recreation hall. It was downtown, on the corner of Madison or Adams Street. It was the Recreation Center of Dover Hall. It was a big building where they had nightly dancing. I went every week. My mother was very angry about that. She said, “Only bad girls go downtown.” Any night that we could find someone from Birmingham to go with we went and had a good time.

There were other dances too. We used to go to East Harbor View. We would have to “bum rides” but we had a lot of boyfriends who could take us. We would butter them up. I used to go to a dance out at the Marina at Point Place where they had a marathon dance contest. We used to go there almost every night to watch the dance contest because there were two Hungarians dancing and they danced continuously. They would get ten to fifteen minute breaks each hour and then they would have to dance again. The contest was on the radio. My mother was very interested because she knew one of these people. He was the brother of a priest at Saint Stephen’s. My mother and sister would sleep on each other’s shoulders asking, “Is he still dancing? Is he still in?” They would stay up all night. Finally, it ended and I don’t remember



who won but it wasn't the Hungarians. They did hang in there until the very end, though.

## **Relations with the Polish**

Every Thursday, we used to take walks on the Consaul Street Bridge. Four of five of us would walk across and see these Polish guys hanging out at their end of the bridge. They used to have a lot of battles there because the Hungarian guys did not want us to go over there so they would verbally beat up on the Polish boys. A group of us girls would go all together to Riverside Park to get popcorn and then we would walk back again. By that time, it would be dark and we would see that everybody got home safely.

When I was a kid, everyone who was not Hungarian was a "polack" and my parents hated the Polish. I don't know why. As for dating a Protestant, heaven help you. They used to call them "Calvinista" in Hungarian. It was a bad word. They were a different religion, so they were beneath you. I wouldn't give up my religion for any man. I would have never married a non-Catholic.

## **Sleeping**

We always had to wake up early in the morning. Nine o'clock was the latest we were allowed to sleep in. Four of us shared the same bed. Three would sleep across the bed with one at the foot of the bed. We had two bedrooms and folding couches in the living and dining rooms.

My sister was very close with her girlfriend and when this girl's parents died, she went to live with her brother. She had a boyfriend and was accused of having an affair in her brother's house, so she left there and moved in with all of us. My mom said that there was always room for one more. We had a lot of friends and they were all welcome in my house.

## **Bootlegging**

I went to do housework for some Jewish people who owned a manufacturing plant. I wanted money because I was fourteen years old and I wanted nice clothes and to help out my family. Because of this I would get to keep very little of my three dollar a week pay. I also went to work for some people on Paine Avenue after school. They

had a bowling alley on Front Street too. Both the husband and the wife worked there so I would baby-sit their little boy each day after school until midnight.

They were bootlegging too and I had to help with this. I had to go down in the basement where the still was. The top of the still had a funnel and steam would come out and I would wait until that gallon jug was filled with whiskey then I would replace it with an empty bottle. Somebody turned them into the revenue agents. Dr. Farkas, an attorney, who was a good friend of the family, tipped them off, "They are coming in the morning." They would clean all night long. They got rid of the copper tubs and tubes and everything. The revenue agents would come and head down into the basement. Most of the time it would look clean, so they weren't caught. They were raided many times.

One time when they expected to be raided, they needed to get rid of their copper broiler. It had to disappear and the wife didn't know what to do with it. She asked me if our family would like it. I asked my mother and she said we would. She liked to make home brew for my father (that was another thing we hated.) We didn't know what to do with this copper tub. My mother became worried that we were going to be caught with it so we decided to bury it in the garden. I still wonder what happened to it when Packo had his house built there. They had to dig in there for the basement. I wonder who found it or what they did when they found it.

## **Work Experience**

I got a job on Summit Street at Hettrick Canvas Awnings when I was a little over sixteen. Then, I got a job at Hettrick's Canvas Manufacturing Company where the Picway shoe store is on Summit Street near Riverside Hospital. Before this though, I got a job at the umbrella factory. On my first job I was a tipper hand sewer. We covered the umbrellas and I had to sew those little ends of the umbrella to the tip so when it was raised it would stay put. I worked there for awhile and then I was laid off, at which time I went to work at a steel factory down on Summit Street and from there I went to Woolson Spice on Summit Street. I always had a job. I was never without work. It was so good to have money. I only kept a couple of dollars and I gave the rest to my mother. She needed it but she told me to buy what ever I needed. I could buy whatever I wanted to. If I wanted an extra pair of shoes or a nice dress or whatever to go places, I could. I liked to go to the dances. I was a good dancer.

When I worked at Hettricks, I lied about my age. I was only sixteen and a half and I told them I was eighteen. That bothered me, "What is going to happen to me?," I

thought. The manager liked me. I was kind of a pet. I was the youngest worker. I finally told the manager that I lied about my age. I did not know if he was going to fire me. He told me I had to go to school.

I had to go to vocational school, to Woodward, for a year and a half. (I have been going to classes ever since, whenever they held typing, shorthand, ceramics, cooking, sewing, cake decorating, or macramé classes, I went...I was interested in everything.) I had to go to vocational school until I was eighteen. I did not get a diploma; I just quit. I did not have to go back because I was eighteen and then I started working nine hours a day. I worked at Hettricks for nineteen years.

We were making awnings when the war broke out. Then, we began making government uniforms, cots, and things for the Army. I did not want to give up my seniority. We did not want to leave our jobs making awnings because we had seniority. We had voted in department seniority. When they needed new girls, however, for the government material they were making, they eliminated my job. We were the oldest but the first ones laid off. I was never without a job though. I went to the Propeller Plant. I got several girls jobs there and I worked there until the war ended.

## **Meals**

We ate whenever we were at home. Mother made enough for all of us. She made coffee in a soup kettle. We didn't have coffeepots. We had a kettle and my mother would make a big kettle of coffee and then she would put in a lot of milk (not cream) and sugar. We would get bakery bread too. They used to make those long loaves and each of us would dunk our bread in that coffee. It tasted great. The meals must have been good, because I am still here. About my theory, my son says, "Mom, you've got something there."

For lunch time Mom didn't prepare a meal. She told us to go to the store and get ten cents worth of bologna for sandwiches and then we had real Hungarian soup for dinner. Sometimes, we would have soup every night because my mother sort of catered to my father. Lunch time, though, was bologna sandwiches or peanut butter and jelly or apple slices or something that was cheap or grown in the garden. The big meal was at night.

We didn't usually have steaks. For a treat, my mother would get round steaks and smother them with gravy. Then she would add bakery bread and potatoes. My kids



still love it. I put the whole pan on the table and they dunk the bread in it. We didn't use butter. We used lard; we rendered our own lard. That gravy was so darn good. Whatever we ate was good.

When I was in grade school, the girls would ask the Sister to excuse them to go home to put the soup on because it cooked for hours. My mother went out to do housework one day per week and sometimes she just disappeared to get away from us or to make a little extra money washing clothes or cleaning house for the wealthy people. On those days, she would tell me, "You be sure to get the soup started." So, we put the meat and beef in the water then let it come to a boil. Then, we would take the scum (the foam) off and then later on, when my mother would come home, she would put in the vegetables and she made homemade noodles. We had a good supper.

The typical meal of Birmingham is soup. Chicken paprikash was a treat when we would have banquets. It was expensive. It requires sour cream and not everybody could afford that. Another soup, Goulash, is mainly beef, noodles, and sliced vegetables. I still make my own noodles.

We made our own sauerkraut in a barrel in the fall. My mom would buy numerous heads of cabbage and she would store them in a corner of the kitchen. Cabbage would be rolling around and we would push it back again until it was time. We had a grater. We had to shred our cabbage and pack it in the barrel and weigh it down with a heavy piece of stone. In the kitchen corner, we had a great big stone. We had to clean scum about every week because that was smelly. It smelled up the whole house.

For deserts we would have fruit and my mother would make poppyseed or nut rolls or we would have donuts, the kind that are supposed to be eaten the day before Lent, Shrove Tuesday. We had bakery bread and that was delicious. We baked just once in awhile. We would get cookies from the store, maybe one or two. We weren't always lucky, though. We weren't that desperate, but it wasn't like now. It was different to be poor then and I wasn't alone.

We had vegetables growing all over. We raised parsley and I still do now. I don't have to plant it because the seeds fall and they keep growing. I give the parsley away. It will continue to grow in my garden as long as the snow continues to melt. We raised carrots, cabbage and other vegetables for soups. We had geraniums. That was a must. People had a lot of geraniums. We would bring them inside in the winter and every window had a shelf nailed to it. It was the flower that anyone who



loved flowers liked most of all. We grew the flowers in either the front or back yards. Nobody had lawns. They had gardens. On Front Street, near the Packo Cafe those people who had gardens in the front still do. There wasn't much space. There was only room for a garden in the front and everyone had a garden.

Everyone who came from Hungary was poor because they came with nothing. When they were in Hungary, my parents thought that the streets in America were paved with gold.

## **My Husband**

When I got married, I changed my name and address. Suddenly, I started receiving letters from Europe from cousins whom I had never seen nor met but were asking for everything. One was a barber. He asked me to buy him a set of barber tools because he couldn't get them there. Another wanted a wedding dress in Hungary. She said they were building their own home and she wrote, "We can't finish the house. We don't have enough money."

That was right after I was married in 1946. My husband had just come home from World War II. I knew his family before I even met him. I used to work at the Propeller Plant until midnight. Because I had to work so late, I felt cheated. So, after work, I used to go where the night club beer joint is and meet my boyfriend, Mike there. I went to school with his sister Julia and she used to come over to my house for lunch. I knew one of the brothers and another sister, but I never knew there was another man there. I didn't even know he existed until that one night he came to the tavern with his uniform on.

I was up in years when I got married. I was thirty-eight years old. I was engaged before I met Mike. The man I was engaged to and I had a little falling out. We dated and then somehow he met another woman and married her and they had a child and then she died of tuberculosis. He told me that he loved me too much to tie me down and I believed him. So, we separated. I felt so sad and I didn't want to trust another man. I just wasn't interested in anyone because I didn't want to go through that again. He did get married to one of my friends but then he died after that. Then, I met my husband right after World War II.

## Courtship

When Mike came home from World War II, he still had his uniform on. I met him at the Playdium on Front Street. He was sitting at the bar and my friend Helen introduced us. I knew his sister. He had another sister too who was a wonderful dancer and she used to go to the Playdium and would dance every dance. She was so popular. We girls were so envious. I could have killed her with looks. I told Mike, "Yes. I know your sister." Of course, he did not know how much I envied her. His other sister also went to school with my sisters.

When they butchered pigs, my mother would render lard and she would peel potatoes and drop them in to the lard kettle. Julia, Mike's sister, used to come over and my mother would serve that for lunch. It was the most delicious thing you ever ate in your life. Julia would come home and ask her mother, "Why don't you make some potatoes like Mrs. Priscsak does?" When I met my mother-in-law for the first time, she had heard all about my mother making these potatoes.

When it was time for me to go home, I would run all five blocks because I had to go on Burger Street and I would look back to see if anyone was following me. I would run up the steps to my door, but nothing ever happened in those days. Anyway, Mike would usually walk me home.

Mike worked nights. When he finally asked me for a date, I was beginning to think he would never ask. He asked for a date on Thursday night. We went to the movies and then he didn't call for a week. I thought, "Is this the end of the romance?" I was beginning to like him and then we went on another date. On the second date he did not try to kiss or hug me at all. I thought, "Oh Gosh, he is a dead head."

The next time was a rainy night. He did not have a car so he borrowed his sister's. At the end of the date I thought, "Well, he is not going to even try to kiss me," so I jumped right out of the car and into the mud! The next day, I had another date with him and I said, "You know why I jumped into that mud!" He had jumped to the conclusion that I was afraid of him. I wasn't. I liked the guy very much. We started dating more frequently after that. We were married four months to the date we met.

He said we could get married but he warned me times were hard since the war happened. I said, "Look, things aren't going to get better overnight. We are getting older so we might as well do it now or forget it." So then he said, "Well, let's set a date." My only specifications were that it not be during Lent or Advent, which was

not allowed. We went to Saint Stephen's Church. That was a rule then. People went to the girl's church to get married.

## **The Wedding**

I had a small wedding but a big shower. More than one hundred people attended the wedding. It was at Saint Stephen's Church at ten o'clock. Food was rationed. We could only get so many loaves of bread and we couldn't get ham because we needed stamps. I had a friend, Anna Juhasz, who ran a store on Front Street and I had done her a big favor and she said, "I will pay you back someday," not realizing that she would have to pay me back under the counter. She saved some beer for me, all the beer I wanted, and ham and lunch meat, and things we couldn't get.

My husband's church was good enough to let us hold the reception at Saint Michael's. We had the old custom of the bridal dance. This is a custom at Hungarian wedding. Anyone wanting to dance with the bride has to put a few dollars in the basket. In other words, they have to buy the bride. Usually this involves a few dollar bills or a five. My brother hired a couple of musicians named the Gypsies. He knew them because they used to play in the neighborhood. He would yell, "The bride is for sale!" and someone would come up to me and take me away from the person I was dancing with. This occurred until I had danced with everyone who was waiting. Then the bridegroom came up and would donate his entire wallet. Some grooms would then proceed to carry the bride out. This depends on the size of the bride. I was little, so he carried me out.

We had breakfast after Mass and then we went to have pictures taken and everybody came back for dinner.

## **First Home**

We moved into an apartment on Huron Street. My sister lived upstairs. We lived there for a couple of months and then we moved into this house. My husband's aunt lived next door to the house I am living in now. She put a bug in my father's ear that this house was empty. Mike told me about it being for sale. I looked at it and I did not know a thing about buying houses. I asked my brother to come over to check it out because Mike went to work and he left it up to me. (Even if I did not want to take charge of things, I had to.) The house cost \$5,500. My brother said I should buy it. So I bought the house and never lived it down. Later, I wanted to move out to better myself. My husband said that I bought the house without him. We had an



ongoing argument about that all the time because I had a lot of responsibility because I was outgoing.

The twenty-three years that we were married, Mike turned his paycheck over to me every week. One week, he didn't. He put it on the dresser and asked if I was going to go to the store. I told him that I wasn't and when he asked me why not, I asked him why he hadn't given me his check. "I did give it to you. It is on the dresser," he explained. I told him that didn't mean he had given it to me. He would give me a kiss every week when he gave me the check just like he was giving me a gift. That was great and I appreciated that. The best thing that ever happened to me in my life was meeting Mike.

This house is beautiful. It is hard to imagine what it first looked like. My husband did most of it. He wanted to do some remodeling. He wasn't handy around the house. Just like my children, he didn't know what a hammer looked like. We hired a carpenter. Nancy Packo's husband, Louie, who died, did the cabinets. My husband was a perfectionist.

### **After Marriage**

In two years, I had my first son. I was forty-two years old when I had my firstborn and I had my second one when I was forty-three. I had c-sections. Mike was worried. He didn't want me to have the second one. I reminded him that it was my life after all.

When I found out that I was pregnant, I was working at Cohen and Freeland. I was four months pregnant and I was going to quit. Nobody knew I was pregnant. One of the girls made the remark, "Barbara, you are getting fat. Maybe you are pregnant!" And I said, "So what! Isn't it about time?"

Everybody was really happy that I was having a baby at my age and then this woman said, "At your age!" I asked, "What is wrong with my age?" She responded, "What is wrong is that these babies are born and they are not really all there." When "that baby" was born, I stripped him. He was all there. He graduated from the University of Toledo, had scholarships, and is working for General Electric in California. My other son works for Hilachi Metals.

The kids were best pals. They were inseparable. They had bunk beds and when they went to bed together, they would talk forever and I would say, "Come on you ladies."



I quit working because I had no baby-sitter. I asked my mother-in-law and she said, "I raised mine. Now you raise your own." I was hurt because she had her granddaughter and another grandchild living with her. But, I wouldn't have worked even if I had a baby-sitter. I had worked long enough and I wanted to know what it was like to have a child. I was old and I wanted to enjoy every minute of it.

The boys were only thirteen months apart. I have four baby books. I took pictures every time they cried or went potty. I marked every little thing. I hope they treasure them as much as I do. I just love to look at my scrapbook. My boys were wrestlers in school. I cut out everything.

I didn't return to work until my husband died suddenly. He was burned very severely.

## **Entertainment**

We would visit or picnic. We often had something going in the neighborhood. They had a lot of doings at Saint Stephen's, like the Harvest Dance and the plays. (I took part in many of the plays.)

We would dance even at home. My husband was a wonderful dancer. When he was in the service, he had a bosom buddy. They were going to start a dance studio when they got out of the service but his friend died.

The Harvest Dance was the only time we wore our costumes. We didn't wear them after we were married. I gave mine to my sister. (She still has it.) When the Birmingham Ethnic Festival started, I made my own. I embroidered my blouse and I got a black vest when I was in Hungary at age seventy-two.

Mike and I belonged to a lot of clubs. When we were dating, we would go out riding and would sing every Hungarian song that we knew. I did not have a great voice. I had these song sheets from Fritz Szollosi with Hungarian songs on them. We brought these with us on trips and on picnics so we could follow along and sing all the songs.

We belonged to the Vultures Club and the Elohsa Club\*. We would meet in a shop. The owner would clean a part of it up and set up picnic tables. The club was for both married couples and singles. We met once a month. We would meet on Sunday afternoons and play cards and games like checkers and we would talk. I was

secretary and treasurer. We would collect dues and give reports about what happened the meeting before. Then, after several years, members were passing away, so we disbanded.

## **Neighbors**

Everybody helped one another out. Neighbors were everlasting friends. They were closer to you than your own relatives. I remember some of them because we did not have any sharp knives and my mother would tell us early in the morning to go over and borrow some from Mr. Perezlai. We just couldn't afford everything we needed. My mother considered the Perezlais rich because they owned their own house. She explained to me that some people were luckier than others.

We knew some black people and they were nice and we didn't know anybody who was bad. My nieces Guizella and Betty lived right across from the National Bakery. There was one black guy there. He was just wonderful and we did have black neighbors who were really nice people to know.

There were a few little houses on Genesee Street where a few black families lived. There was never any trouble. They knew us and we knew them.

## **In Retrospect**

Birmingham has been good to me. I was born and raised here and I am eighty-seven years old. We have opportunities here, like education, employment, entertainment, and shops, just like any other place. Best of all we respect one another's beliefs. Birmingham is what its people want it to be. It is up to us. We have the same advantages here within this close-knit community as can be found in less intimate, larger cities.

# Alberta (Taylor) Traylor

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*Interview by Dr. John Ahern*

My parents came from near Jackson, Mississippi. They lived in Florence, which was about twelve miles from the capital. Like us, there were many African-American families who came from that part of Mississippi to Birmingham. That fall, Amos Taylor, my grandfather came. My grandpa, my father's brothers Rodell, Rufus, Julius, Chester, and Roosevelt, and my father's sister, Amy, came to Birmingham.

My uncle Roosevelt drove the jeep for General Patton in World War II, and when he was discharged from the service, he lived in Gulfport, Mississippi with his wife. Then, he came here to Toledo. We had an aunt in Port Clinton and when she heard of jobs in the area, she would write our relatives and tell them to come from Mississippi. The people in Port Clinton knew my aunt, Amy Coleman. She was well known. We stayed there for six months and then we came to Toledo for work. My father came to this neighborhood in the 30s. When my dad first came, he worked for almost a year until he was hired by the New York Central Railroad. He was a porter on the railroad for ten years. In those days, that was considered a very nice job. They tried to hire very respectable Negroes but he was away from the family so much that he decided to take a job with the American Brake Company on Wheeling Street. He made brake shoes for the train.

Dad worked there almost thirty years, until they went out of business. We were a large family and Dad had to do extra work. He could paint and he learned how to do plumbing from Mr. Ishan. He was a plumber here in the neighborhood who had a home and an office on Front Street, next to Tony Packo's. He trained my Dad. Besides working for Mr. Ishan, he had two other jobs to help feed us. There were twelve of us (ten living and two who died.) We had to work for what we got. My dad taught me the value of work.

Dad didn't buy a house. A lot of Hungarian people wanted to sell Dad a house because they liked him so much. We lived on Front Street and we rented from Anna and Tony Hollo. Mrs. Hollo was Mr. Strick's daughter who owned Strick Hall. Now, the house is torn down.



My mother didn't work because there were too many of us and she stayed home and took care of us. She was a very brave, strong, and humble person. She didn't gossip and she never started trouble. The Hungarian people and their children respected my mother. She had all these children and she never started any trouble. Many of the Hungarian children and other neighborhood children came to our home. They liked to eat my mother's turkey and dressing. My mother and her sister made homemade rolls and the Hungarian kids used to stop at our house. When she passed away in February of last year, I received many cards from neighborhood people expressing their sympathy.

My grandpa and grandma Amos and Mamie Taylor lived with us for years and we used to trade at Juhaz Market, which was located on Bogar and Front Streets. Years later, Dewitt McDaniels purchased that building. His son was Dr. McDaniels, Ms. Baker's brother. He became a doctor and lived in California. I think it was in the spring of that year that my mother, grandmother, an aunt, and I came. The others stayed and gathered the crops and came that fall.

## **School**

I graduated from Birmingham School. There was a woman principal when I started first grade. I remember she had white hair. Mr. Materny was teaching before he became the principal. He always liked my family and me. (He was able to get me a scholarship to go into nursing training, but I was unable to accept it because I was needed at home.) All the teachers were nice to me. I was a good kid.

Mr. Materny would usually get a female teacher to paddle the girls. But if we did something really bad, he would walk us home. I would rather have been paddled by one of the female teachers than to have Mr. Materny walk me home! If he did, my mother would give it to me and then my dad would. I couldn't convince my parents that I had gotten in trouble because the teachers didn't like me. That didn't go with my family. Mr. Materny would say, "This young lady was talking and she wouldn't listen and she rolled her eyes at me." That was all he needed to say.

I went to Waite High School for four years. Sometimes I had to walk there because so many busses would pass me. Those buses were very full.



## **Our Home**

We lived at 2020 Front Street. The house was roomy. My mother put all the girls in one room and the boys were in another room. We had these great big beds. We slept two in a bed. The kitchen was rather big but the house looked like it was built backwards because we would come in the kitchen and all the other rooms were upstairs. It was probably a store before they turned it into rental property. Years later, right under the stairway off the kitchen, they put in a bathroom. In the past, most of the time, bathrooms were outside the house.

## **Meals**

For breakfast we ate oatmeal and grits and my mother made buttermilk biscuits and she would fry bacon. At noon, people had soups and sometimes we had chicken and dumplings. In the evening (depending upon what Mom had available) we would have fried or baked chicken with corn bread dressing or she would cook beef roast. I can not remember eating a single hamburger. I remember beef with gravy and potatoes. My mother made delicious sweet potatoes. She was a good cook. We would get angry when my uncle would stop by our house on his way from church. He liked jelly cakes, sweet potato pies, and pudding. He always wanted some. My mother made homemade pound cakes.

Aunt Minerva was one hundred and something yet she used to make the greatest coconut cake from scratch. I make turkey and cornbread dressings at Thanksgiving. I also make sweet potato pie in the fall and at Christmas. It is my granddaughter's special request. Our family still eats grits. My husband loves them since he is from the South.

## **Marriage**

My husband was a junior in high school when he came to this area. Lily, Aunt Laura's sister, had me over for dinner one day. Her uncle was married to my husband's aunt and he lived with them. When Lily introduced him to me I thought, "My, what a handsome young man!"

After we were introduced, I didn't see him for four years. I had graduated from high school and was going to the University of Toledo when he began calling me. I attended the University for two and a half years and then I went to Davis Business College a year before we got married. I dated him a year. He went to our church and

his aunt was one of the original members of the Zion Hill Baptist Church, Jimmale Jones. Her husband was George Jones. While he was living in the South, his family told him about his rich aunt in the North. He came here to see how she was doing. He said the only thing that he found here that made him really happy was me. He wished he had taken me back to St. Louis, Missouri.

## **Home**

We got married June 15. This year, we will have been married for 42 years. Three of my children were born at Saint Vincent's Hospital and one at Toledo Hospital. Before we were married, my husband was on the other side of town, on Palmwood. We lived there with his aunt for awhile, until I became pregnant and we had to move upstairs to have more room.

My grandfather used to come and visit me because I was not feeling well while I was pregnant. He was a blessing. He asked me how much I was paying to live there. He told me, "It is too hot up here and you shouldn't have to walk up and down these steps!" I informed him that we were waiting to move into an apartment and he said that we could come and stay with him. He put me in one of his guest rooms. He lived on Ironwood.

We bought our house at 419 Paine Avenue thirty years ago. Someone asked me if Eleanor Mesteller had sold it to us. It was really a man from Rossford. Out there on Paine Avenue and on Woodford Street there were some nice people. If you were black, though, there were some streets that you just did not walk down, like York and Wheeling Streets. Now my daughter has a home there but in those days, it was not safe, especially if you were black. There were Southern whites down there who were not so nice, so we never ventured down there after dark. Some of those people were out of the deep South.

## **National Bakery**

I used to walk down Genesee Street from school. I used to meander down the alley along Front Street and turn past the bakery. The owner always called me "the oldest Taylor girl" and her daughters still do. These girls baked wonderfully. When their dad and mom baked that bread, we could smell it over at our house. They used to make cake but they have stopped. I have a sister who has ten living children, twenty-seven grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. Her wedding cake was from the National Bakery; it was one of the last ones they baked.

## **Work**

Years ago, I worked for one summer as a library aide for Miss McCarthy. She was very nice. She was special. She treated me as if I was her sister or her daughter. In high school, I just got along. I didn't cause trouble and I even took Latin for three or four years. I wanted a good college preparatory course and I also wanted a good business course.

We had a little old woman with strawberry blonde hair at Waite who was a business teacher. I can see her now. She reminded me of a chicken. She was really tiny. She used to bring in eggs from her farm. Once she told me, "I don't know why you want to take typing and business and all this because they don't hire any of your people." I said to her, "I am going to take the class." Yet, I remember, when I graduated, she told everybody about her beautiful student, Alberta Taylor.

## **Life at the University**

At the University, it was very hard. I did not receive a scholarship. I had to work. One professor tried his best to make me stay at the University of Toledo instead of dropping out. He told me, "There is coming a time and it is not too far off for your people. Just hang on a little longer," but I just could not. I had to work to feed myself.

I took an English course and we had to write 500 words. We were only permitted to misspell three words. The instructor told me that he hoped one day I would write a book or work for a newspaper or something. But school was very difficult for me. I worked all day at Saint Vincent's and then I would attend class in the evenings. One day, one of the sisters at the hospital asked, "You mean, you take two busses to get here and then you go all the way home and take a bath, get dressed, and go back to the University?" I said, "Yes, Sister." She told me to pack my things and to bring them there. After I was done working at three, she would make me lie down and sleep in her office and then she would tell me to get up, get dressed, and eat something and then I would go to the University. Someone came through the hospital about fifteen years ago and asked, "Why are there so many black people here?" The sisters said, "Everybody gets in on this hall. They are all God's children and they are here to be taken care of." That is not always the way it is today. Businessmen have moved into Saint Vincent's.



## **Race Relations and a Brief Tour**

I remember that old building on the corner of Front and Main Streets where the Flower Peddler is located. They had a place where they sold sandwiches and hot cocoa and those sorts of things, but we blacks had to buy it and stand outside to drink and eat it. Later on, across the street, they made the best roast beef. I took care of some of the owner's relatives when I worked at Saint Vincent's in the evenings. He was nice and saw to it that I had a sandwich and potato and something warm to drink before I walked across the bridge to the hospital. (People didn't have cars and the busses were full.) The bridge is now called The Martin Luther King Jr. Bridge. I was working at Saint Vincent's when I got married and I worked there, off and on, for almost thirty years.

## **The Christmas Plays**

The majority of the boys and girls we went to school with were very nice. I did not have any trouble with them. They did not call us names because we were African-American. At Christmas time, Saint Stephen's had the Oregs. They would always stop at our house and my brothers and sisters would run and hide. They wore costumes and carried a little church. They used to come up to our porch and pound on the door and peak in the windows and my mother and everybody else would just laugh. They knew us because some of my brothers played basketball with their kids. They carried axes and they would pound on the door. We donated to their church. Father Hernady blessed our house.

## **Memories of Zion Hill**

Zion Hill began in the 1930s. It was originally called Mount Pilgrim (where I belong now.) It started in a storefront on Front Street. Then it moved to Woodford Street. Now, Zion Hill is selling that property and has purchased Saint Michael's on Valentine. Mount Pilgrim has moved across the river. Some of the church members did not want to move. They even resisted in court but they lost the case. They tried to buy property in this neighborhood but it was very difficult for them to do that. They wanted to purchase some land next to the Holy Rosary but residents said they did not want a Baptist Church there because they were too noisy.

Yet, a lot of Hungarian people loved the singing. One man told me that he worked until midnight and he would always hurry up to get home so he could sit on his porch and listen to the choir sing. Church members wanted to expand the church on



Woodford. In order to do this, they would have had to buy the property on either side, and the neighbors would not sell their land. So, Mount Pilgrim voted to move across the river to Indiana Ave. The entire church was built by African-Americans and our minister was African-American. When the expressway came through, it took that church on Indiana Ave. The African-Americans who remained in this neighborhood needed a church so, Reverend Martin purchased an old building and started Zion Hill.

I still go to Zion Hill for special functions. My mother stayed at Zion Hill and my dad's funeral was held there. My mother's funeral was at Zion Hill's new building on the corner of Bogar and Valentine.

I remember Deacon Larkin recently spoke at Mr. Plumber's (who was white) funeral. Mrs. Plumber, the mother, and I worked in PTA together and two of her daughters would play and come to our house at lunch time. My brother and the Hungarian boys would fight but they wouldn't hurt each other and in the afternoon you would see them playing ball or fishing over by what is now the Malleable Steel. Back then, it was nice, but around here today, things are different.

## **Last Words**

I always thought I would leave Birmingham but, for some reason, I am still here and it has not been bad. What I liked most about living here is the Hungarian people. They worked hard and we worked hard.

I remember one of our neighbors would make us chicken paprikash and she would only ask that we pay for the chicken. When our house burned, I couldn't believe all the people who came out to help. Eleanor Mesteller and her parents sent four beds and mattresses to our house.

During the 1960s and 70s it was especially enjoyable living here. I worked in the Birmingham School PTA. I visited all the schools on the East Side. We had a smorgasbord and we would go to different schools. We would have fashion shows. And when Martin Luther King Jr. was shot, this neighborhood was very kind to me.

But in the last twenty years, attitudes have changed. There is a different feeling in this neighborhood. I think it is all over the nation. My daughters Joyce, Gail, Roxanne, and Sandra could go anywhere in the neighborhood and people knew they

were the Traylor girls. They would invite Sandra to play softball or basketball. Now, there is a different element.

My husband and I have grown old in Birmingham. I never thought we would, but we have. I have five grandchildren and four daughters with three son-in-laws and one who has died. We have had a good life here in Birmingham. For awhile, I regretted not selling my home and moving further out towards Oregon. But now I am glad I stayed in Birmingham. It is just pleasant to be here.

# Magdalene Ujvagi

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*Interviewed by Dr. John Ahern*

I was born in Budapest, Hungary in Obuda (the older part of Budapest) in 1953. My parents, my three brothers and I came to the United States in 1956 during the Hungarian Revolution. We tried to escape one time prior to that and we were caught. On Christmas Eve, in 1956, we tried again and we made it across the border. I was almost four. My father was self-employed in Hungary which, at the time, was not easy and he really did not want my three brothers to be recruited into the Communist Army when they became older. Once a family acquired some money, they [the Communist government] would just take it away. So, in October of 1956, my parents decided that our family would try to make it across the border.

The first time, we asked some friends to take us relatively near the border and drop us off, but we were stopped by the German-Russian soldiers and taken back to one of the villages and told, "Don't you ever dare try again. You try again and your children might be taken away from you." My father would be put in jail. They sent us back with a very strong warning.

My father was still restless. He felt that for the sake of our future we had to leave Hungary. On Christmas Eve, during the afternoon, despite the fact that our tree was up as usual, without saying a word to any of our relatives, we left. I remember leaving the dog named Macko behind, which a neighbor eventually adopted. This time, my father hired someone to take us close to the border. Basically, we had what was on our backs and a few little suitcases in which to carry small things. Dad gave his watch to the person who was to get us across the border as well as a lot of the cash that we had on us. The person went with us into the night and then at one point he told us, "See that light way in the distance? You follow that light and when you get there, you will be in Austria." He said that it was too dangerous for him. He had to turn back, so we kept walking.

I remember that I had a toothache, so Dad carried me. My mother carried my brother, Peter, a lot of the way. There was snow. Dad was getting a little worried as we kept walking and walking—we didn't seem to be making any progress. Finally,

we came to a stream and my father knew that it was supposed to be flowing towards Austria. He and one of my brothers went down to verify its direction and it was flowing in the opposite direction! We were given the wrong directions!

My mother was ready to turn around, but my father said, "No." We came to a small village and knocked on a couple of doors. People wouldn't let us in. They were very worried that they would get into trouble. At last, one couple let us in. They warmed us up with some soup and then Dad left to try to find the fellow who had taken our money. If I remember correctly, he did find him, but by that time the man had already spent most of the money. So, my father returned and we set out again. Some Hungarian soldiers caught us and my parents begged them, "If you send us back, we will be in big trouble. Please. We have children. Let us go." They let us go, but gave us a warning. They felt that we were going to get caught anyway because there were soldiers all over the place. They made us promise that if we were to get caught, we would not say anything about them finding us first.

We came to the border. There weren't any big, barbed wire fences around and that is why so many people did make it out. Christmas Eve, we made it over the river to Austria. There was a man waiting there for some relatives with whom he had made arrangements to meet. Dad rushed over and asked him, "Is this Austria?" My parents were elated and then exhausted. They took us right away because there were so many refugees coming through. They took us to a building where we took off our wet clothes. Someone there told us that at the other end of the village, they were giving out food and dry clothes. I remember one of the things my Mom was always saying was that we had to put back on our wet socks and the wet clothes to walk across to the building where they would help us.

They sent us to a camp for refugees. It was like a big dormitory sort of place. Dad was lucky because he was able to find a job relatively quickly in Austria because he was a tool and die maker. He did not have to know the language. They saw right away that he knew what he was doing. We were there for about six months.

My dad really wanted to come to America. Mom was willing to go somewhere else, but Dad would only accept the United States. At that time, in order to come to the U.S., it was necessary to have someone sign for you. We wrote to our relatives in the United States. They informed us that they would be happy to sign any sort of papers that we needed, but they were not in a position to help us financially. So, in July of 1957, we boarded an old, Army plane. The door of the plane was secured by tying the handle with rope. Many of us became ill on the plane because it hit so many air



pockets and because it was so old. I kept asking why we couldn't have taken a bus to America! We landed in New York and stayed for two weeks at Saint Vincent DePaul. Dad would have loved to go to California because everyone in Hungary hears about California. But, with a family our size, we could not afford that. Since our distant relatives here could not help us, we had to have someone vouch for us, and, I am not quite sure how, but Father Hernady, through Saint Vincent DePaul, in the Catholic Charities, said that there would be a home for us in Toledo and he would find work for us.

## **Birmingham**

We arrived by train to Toledo. We lived on Magyar Street. The house is not there anymore, they tore it down. It was right behind Evanco's. My father was able to find work as a tool and die maker right away with Toth Industries (a company owned by Hungarian-Americans). He did not have to know English. There were quite a few Hungarian refugees working there, especially around 1956, as well as some second generation Hungarians. Mr. Toth knew Hungarian, so Dad was able to converse with him. I remember the first day of work. We didn't have a car. We didn't know the bus system. He had directions relating how to get there, so the day before, he and my brother walked to it across the bridge. My oldest brother and Dad timed how long it would take him to get there by walking to it and coming back.

I spoke only Hungarian before kindergarten. I learned English pretty fast. When you are young and going to kindergarten, it is easy to pick it up. At home, we spoke only Hungarian. Within six months to a year after arriving, we bought a house at 2005 Bakewell.

## **Childhood**

My mother cleaned for Mr. and Mrs. Kish who also lived on Bakewell. She worked whenever they needed her. It was at least three to four times a week for a good couple of years, especially after buying the house. Most of the time, I didn't realize that I was a refugee, except when I had language difficulties. I enjoyed kindergarten. One of my clearest memories was one Easter time. We were coloring eggs and the teacher was giving me directions that I just couldn't understand. I remember sensing that she was frustrated and upset, but I just did not understand what she was telling me. I remember being frustrated.

The only way in which I think I looked different from the other children was that I had pierced ears, which, back then, no one had. Back in Hungary the girls wore the same earrings all the time. In grade school here (1957-58), there was not that much taught about Hungarian heritage. Hungarian wasn't taught in the schools. We knew Hungarian because we spoke Hungarian at home. That is all we ever spoke. The minute we walked into the house, it was Hungarian, period! But when we spoke outside of the house and at school and with our friends, we spoke English. I never felt pressured to speak Hungarian at home. It was just very natural. That is what we were and that is what we did.

## **Hungarian Traditions**

Father Hernady, the pastor of St. Stephen's, was Hungarian. If he stopped in the hall and saw me, he would say a few words in Hungarian. Many of the sisters at that time were Hungarian and so, they would speak Hungarian occasionally. Other than that, there was no Hungarian taught. Nevertheless, you knew that you were in a Hungarian school and a Hungarian neighborhood.

## **Embroidery**

Embroidery started to come back when I was already in my late teens, during the 1970s. A woman who taught it came over from Hungary. Father Hernady invited her from Budapest. She taught embroidery classes to the children at St. Stephen's and I watched. Classes had also started then for adults both at Calvin United and at St. Stephen's.

## **Hungarian History**

Hungarian history was taught only when the class reached a point in which they were having a lesson on the history of Europe. In the third grade, I remember Sister Cecelia would talk more about Hungary and would ask me questions about Hungary. I would relate stories of my remembrances to the class. I don't remember whether we were taught about the Revolution of 1956. The 56ers were the ones who started the Hungarian Club. They were the 1956 Freedom Fighters. We originally held meetings and small plays at the Playdium. They would have programs which included poetic recitations and songs.

Later, there was sort of a rebirth of Hungarian culture, but when I was a child, "Americanism" was stressed. There was no special focus on Hungarian traditions or

heritage, except for a brief focus upon the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 in history classes in the upper grades. In the auditorium, there were Hungarian flags and a lot of students had Hungarian names. Most likely, most of them were second or third generation. I don't remember if there was an emphasis on the pride of being Hungarian. However, we used to celebrate Father Hernady's name day, which was sort of a Hungarian tradition. We would always be given a half day off of school.

In the early sixties, we did have Harvest Dances and we did have parades on Consaul Street. I remember the women in their red, white and green costumes. It died out then for awhile in the late '60s and early '70s. Yet there was Budapest Night at St. Stephen's, which is a fundraiser for the school and could be considered sort of a Harvest Dance. There really wasn't an official Harvest Dance at the Hungarian Club until the early '70s.

## **Hungarian Club**

Those of us that came to the U.S. in 1956 felt that we needed a building that was our own. We had many meetings and dances in the basement of Saint Michael's, and eventually, we were able to buy a theater. We then gutted and rebuilt it. There we had mostly Hungarian dances and the food was always Hungarian.

The club started changing in the '70s. Slowly, some second and third generation people joined the club. We attracted a larger circle of people when we sponsored singers from Hungary or poetry readings. The impression was that this club was designed for the people that came out in 1956, so there were really few people from the neighborhood who were members.

This feeling started to change in the '70s largely, I think, due to the influence of my husband, Imre Bertalan. My husband was a neighborhood organizer, that is, before he became a minister. In 1976, he moved here and became a member of the club. He brought in people first from Calvin United, such as Judy Balogh and others. Slowly, the image of the club changed and people decided it was acceptable to join. I'm not sure why we weren't more inclusive initially. I think the pressure to speak Hungarian proficiently scared off some newcomers.



## Teen Age Years

I began high school at St. Stephen's and then went to St. Ursula Academy. We were looking into a Catholic girls' school and the decision was between St. Ursula and McAuley High School. St. Ursula had a very strong art program and I loved to draw. Sometimes "kids" would pay me dimes and nickels to do their art work for them at Saint Stephen's. My mother really didn't do any folk art because she came from the city. It was different from what I do now. Mom did a lot of knitting and sewing. She sewed most of our dresses.

We always had relatives coming to the U.S. and we were always sending gifts home to relatives. The first time we went to Hungary was in 1963-64. I was in the seventh grade. When we first left Hungary, we thought that we could never return, but then there was some type of general amnesty. They said people who left Hungary in '56 were trying to escape the former regime.

At school, I was known as "Maggie" or "Magdalene." I wasn't known as "Baba." One of my best friends, Sue Pohlman, still calls me "Maggie" and if she would call me "Baba," it would sound very strange. I met Sue Haydu Pohlman in high school. I was the only one at St. Ursula from Birmingham. There were a couple of Hungarian girls named "Flory" who attended the academy before me, but at that time there was no one from the neighborhood.

I wasn't trying to hide the fact that I was Hungarian. Every once in awhile, I would bring in my mom's pastries and the children always loved those. While a sophomore in high school, I came across a record that I had bought at Tiedtke's. The record featured different types of Hungarian music. All of a sudden, the music did something to me. I would play that music dozens of times during the day and I continued to play it over and over again. (I still have that record.)

I am not exactly certain what did it, but, suddenly, I included Hungarian aspects in every assignment I was given at school. The first oil paintings that I did were scenes from Hungary. I started signing my work "Baba." We had always been listening to Hungarian music at home; we always had both modern Hungarian records as well as the old ones, but this one inspired me. It was mostly folk music, not quite the same type as the Magyar Dancers do now. It was stylistic, but it was definitely folk music.



## **The Magyar Dancers**

There were different dance groups in Birmingham from the beginning. Mary Pigott of Calvin United was in a group. Kardy Boray was also a person involved in dance groups. I'm sure St. Stephen's also had one. The music would be the music that their parents played when they were younger. The teachers would mix together steps borrowed from various regions and then the resulting dance would become a Birmingham dance. Every Hungarian community in America has some sort of dance that they call their own. Fairly consistently, there were dancers in Birmingham. It almost died out shortly before Imre and I were married. Once we were married, however, people became interested in starting the dance groups again.

I had never been a Hungarian dancer. While I was at the University of Toledo, I started going to the International Institute and did a great deal of international dancing (and with that some Hungarian dancing), but I didn't really know much about Hungarian dancing. Because I was familiar with Hungarian music and could select appropriate music for Hungarian dancing, people kept asking me about it and I became involved. While I was pregnant, I received a flyer in the mail from a center in New Jersey that was training Hungarian dancers. I recruited Sue Pohlman to go to the camp with me. By the time it began, I had delivered a baby girl and left her with my mother-in-law. A neighbor whose mother was the President of the dance institute in New Jersey sponsored Sue and me by donating fifty dollars towards our trip.

Before we left, Sue and I started the dance group. I sent out flyers and children were starting to come in and we started working on costumes. I felt confident that I knew a few simple dances to get us started and I planned to learn more at the dance camp.

Once we arrived at the camp, we discovered that most of the participants were virtually professionals. They were sympathetic towards us and, luckily, we ran into an older Hungarian gentleman who was teaching some simple dances. Those are the dances we brought back to Birmingham.

## **Art Work**

I feel more comfortable in the realm of art than in that of dance. We had been doing egg-decorating before I left for the dance camp. When I returned, we did it again. I have always incorporated Hungarian traditions into the dance. Even when I was teaching dance, it was not merely dancing that was being "taught" but also a little bit of language, history, culture and egg-decorating too at Easter time for the children.

## **Dousing**

I don't remember dousing a great deal. We just ran around playing in the neighborhood. We were from the city and at that point in Hungary, that wasn't done in the cities. We felt very comfortable with our Hungarian heritage; we just came from Hungary and we didn't need that kind of connection to remind us of our Hungarian heritage.

## **The Marriage**

I married Imre Bertalan, who is now the minister at Calvin United Church. I met him through my brother Peter who knew his father. Peter was involved in organizing the neighborhood in 1976. One day, he mentioned to me that a young fellow was coming into town to interview for an organizing job and that I really should meet him. He said, "He comes from a nice Hungarian family and maybe you and he could get together and talk." The weekend he came to interview he stayed at Peter and his wife Betty's house on Paine Avenue. On one of the evenings he stayed there, Peter and Betty had some sort of engagement and I was commissioned to baby-sit their children.

Our first impressions of each other weren't that great. We hardly spoke that night. I spent the time embroidering a blouse and watching the children. He was watching TV and reading. My first thought was that he didn't look Hungarian with his big, red, curly Afro. That first evening we didn't talk much at all. Then, he got an internship in Detroit. He worked there for six months before finally moving down to Toledo. We met a couple of times while he was still up in Detroit because he would still come down to work. At the time, I was dating another organizer and the two of us would go up to parties in Detroit. I would meet Imre. He claims he knew things were getting serious one night, at an organizers' party at one of the hotels on Miami Street.

At the party, there were organizers from both Toledo and Detroit, so, it was very large. It was a nice evening and I was bringing the stereo for the party in my dad's truck. I went in, and among all those fellows, I asked Imre to come out and bring the stereo. He said he knew then things were getting serious. We dated for a couple of years.

He knew I liked winter, so he wanted to propose to me on the High Level Bridge while it was snowing. Unfortunately, that winter it hardly snowed and the one time it

did snow, Imre happened to be home in New Jersey. So, he was a little upset and he waited until January when it was snowing just a little bit. He didn't want to take any chances. At that time, I was living on Bakewell again and he said, "Let's go for a walk--a little drive," and we walked up to the middle of the High Level Bridge and he proposed. We always kid around with our children that Daddy said if I would have told him "no," he was going to throw me over! The other neat thing that I remember about our courtship took place during the winter of the big blizzard. One morning, he just showed up and walked into my place in his big, army trench coat and the big, black, military boots. He walked all the way over to my house in the snow just to say "hi." I was impressed by that. The wedding was in the end of November.

My family liked him. I think the fact that he was a Hungarian was a big plus. However, by that time, they had met his parents and the question of religious difference became significant. How were we going to deal with the fact that I came from a Catholic family and Imre's father and grandfather were ministers? Early on in the courtship, Imre wasn't even sure that he would become a minister like the generations before him. We talked about that quite a bit after he asked me to marry him. My father was especially worried about how things would work out. But, Imre asked my father out to lunch and asked for his permission to marry me. It was given.

We were married at Calvin United. It was quite a large wedding. It sort of grew and grew. At first, we were hoping to get Saint Stephen's Hall, but then we soon realized that it wouldn't be big enough. There were close to 1,000 people at the wedding. We invited everyone from our church. I think poor Dad is still paying off portions of it. Imre's family, too, invited many friends and members of their church from New Jersey. There were so many that they hooked up a video camera in the church basement because the church was so full. Guests had to sit in the choir loft and in the basement. The National Guard Armory was the only place big enough for the reception. When I first saw it, I thought, "Oh! This is gigantic!" It looked sort of drab, but some of my brothers and Imre's cousins put some of my paintings on the walls and really fixed the hall beautifully. We had a Hungarian band from Cleveland and they played all night.

The wedding was very Hungarian. We said our vows in Hungarian. Imre didn't wear a tuxedo. Instead, he wore a sort of suit that the upper class and soldiers used to wear in Hungary during the late 1800's. It was a black suit with buttons and it belonged to my brother Eddie, who had it made in Hungary. I had my bridal gown sewn in Hungary. I embroidered the headpiece and those of my five or six maids of honor. The food at the reception was Hungarian. Also, one side of our invitations



was written in English and the other side was in Hungarian. At the reception, my father-in-law, who has a beautiful voice, sang one of my favorite Hungarian songs. It is about the prettiest girl in the world.

In Hungary (mainly in the villages), at midnight, the bride would change from her gown into a red and white (usually polka-dotted) dress with a kerchief, which was meant to symbolize that she was now a house wife. Although, I didn't do it at the stroke of midnight, like in Hungary, I did do that. Then, after the reception, we came to the Hungarian Club and I helped cook breakfast for whoever decided to come along.

### **The Minister's Wife**

I changed religions. I joined Imre's church, but one of my main concerns was being a "minister's wife." The minister's wife who was at the church before me played the organ and knew what was expected of her. While we were engaged, Imre took me to a meeting held by the ladies at his church so that I could get to know them. This was fine, except for the fact that these women were, indeed, strangers and were also much older than I was. They baked. Their entire meeting revolved around how many dozen eggs to buy to make the noodles and things like this. ( I can relate to it now, but I couldn't then.) I was sort of out of my league at that point. By the time the meeting was over, I was inducted as a member and Imre paid my dues. After we left I said, "Don't ever do that to me again!"

Looking back, I have to say that the people here really accepted me from the beginning. There were no pressures. I became involved in the things that interested me, as I got to know the congregation and as I felt comfortable. For example, most of the young ministers' wives worked and I worked until the children were born. It was accepted. I also kept my family's name. Not everyone likes that. My mother really was opposed; she felt that I should've taken on Imre's name. It really doesn't bother Imre.

I remember learning to entertain. An older minister and his wife from Cleveland were visiting our church because he was scheduled to preach that Sunday, after which they were planning on coming to our house for dinner. I felt that I was a good cook, but when entertaining someone like that, it was difficult to know exactly what to do. I decided to make some hearty chicken soup. I started in the morning and everything was fine. After church, everyone was sitting in the living room and I had



to strain the soup in order to make it possible to have the chicken as a separate course. Doing so made me extremely nervous. I placed the huge colander in the sink and began to strain the soup, but I forgot to put a pot underneath it! Before I realized what I was doing, half of the soup was gone. So, I made chicken bouillon. (I wasn't caught.)

## **On Being Hungarian-American**

I am very proud to be both Hungarian and American. It is not that I feel that I am more Hungarian than American, but being Hungarian is very important to me and so I call myself Hungarian-American. It is funny, when I am in Hungary and I talk about "home," I talk about America and the reverse is also true. My parents were both such big influences on me and my brothers and sisters. There were never attempts made to deny our Hungarian heritage. Living in that type of atmosphere made it seem natural to come home and speak Hungarian. Around the supper table, we would talk about things that were going on, not only in Hungary, but in the world. I think this was a shaping experience which has determined whom I've become.

## **The Future of Birmingham**

I see great opportunities in Birmingham. There are some younger people moving back in. I think one of the main changes that needs to occur is that people need to begin owning their own homes. Birmingham is a strong community. It is important to look beyond the older houses and things like that. Looking at the Hungarian Club and the churches as well as all the people who live in the community can attest to its strength. The neighbors help and look out for each other. If an issue comes up, or someone is in need, the community is there. This is one of the reasons that we returned to Toledo, to Birmingham, because we missed this sense of community. With enough time and planning, Birmingham could be rebuilt. It is so close to downtown. Buildings could be renovated for younger families and for the "yuppies" and it is close to where people work. I believe the cause of one of the most pressing problems is the "absentee landlord."

The older I get, the more special Birmingham becomes to me, and the more I see its potential. Also, the older I become, the more I understand what these people, the Hungarians, along with other ethnic groups, went through to build this neighborhood. I tend to get very emotional sometimes just walking down the street and seeing those old houses and remembering some of the people who lived there. It is unique. It still has this sense of togetherness and belonging that I am not sure is present in the

suburbs. People ask me how I can stand to still live here in the neighborhood with all of these children in this old house. For me, it is a privilege and I think that this is very important to pass on to our children. Kardy Boray and I were at a party at a friend's house and we found some old pictures in the attic of peoples' grandfathers and great-grandfathers and Kardy was able to identify many of them so we started to write down some of their names. At one point, Kardy said, "Well, what does it matter, when I am gone, nobody will care." But we do care, we have to care.

# Peter Ujvagi

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*"In Commemoration of the 40th Anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution"  
A Presentation to the Birmingham Cultural Center*

Thank you for the opportunity and honor to be here with all of you tonight to look back over the last forty years and to share my thoughts and observations about the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 as well as of the journey that we, Hungarian Americans of Toledo and the Birmingham neighborhood, have all been on during these four decades.

Forty years! How time has flown by. For my family and me that day in October seems like yesterday. It is as if time slows down and the details of the days leading up to that day will always be imbedded in my mind and in my soul. It is important that we all take time this month to pause a little, to remember and reflect. It is just as important to pass on to our children and grandchildren the events and lessons of those October days. So, I would like to ask you to pause for a moment and think back to some forty years ago.

What were you doing on October 23, 1956? Where were you? When did you first hear of the developments in that little Central European country called by its people Magyarország, Land of the Magyars? Forty years have now passed since those exciting and tragic days. Those of us who came as refugees to these shores are no longer refugees but now are Americans, Hungarian Americans, and tonight we begin to remember again events, times and pains that perhaps for some may have been long forgotten.

I was but seven years old when the revolution broke out. But I will never forget, never forget the dark nights when with shutters down, in the dark of our living room, my brother Charles turned on Radio Free Europe, Szabod Europa, to hear the true news of developments in Budapest.

I will never forget the excited reports of people who returned to our apartment building on Bécsi UT on October 23rd to tell us that the march to the statue of General Bem had become the spark for the revolution in Hungary.

I'll never forget the wonder and the excitement on the faces of our family and neighbors when it looked like the Russians might actually withdraw from Budapest. But, I'll also never forget the sky as it shown red from the bombardment of the Russian artillery on the morning of November 3rd. The Soviet army had begun its assault on Budapest. I'll never forget the look on my parents' faces as they bundled us up and took my two brothers, Charles and Edward, and my sister Baba to the basement of our uncle's apartment. I'll never forget seeing men stick mattresses and plywood against the windows to protect us against possible cannon fire and shrapnel. Nor will I forget the rumbling of Russian tanks as they roared down Bésci UT. There seemed to be hundreds of them.

You must remember, this was not a revolution of right wing factions or the elite. It was a revolution of workers, farmers, peasants, youth, university students and intellectuals, and most of all, socialists and communists. These were the exact people that the "workers' proletariat" was supposed to serve. By November 2nd we had a government in place, a socialist government headed by a communist of 40 years, Imre Nagy, and he was negotiating with the Russians for their withdrawal. Then on November 3rd the treachery happened. I'll never forget.

And I'll never forget that radio broadcast: "For God's sake help Hungary, help Hungary." But no help came and little by little the last outposts of the freedom fighters fell.

The last radio broadcast was heard on the afternoon of November 7th. Yet into December and even January, pockets of armed resistance continued, and while the world marveled at the bravery of the Hungarian people, no one came to help. Little by little at first, then as if in a flood, people looked out at a bleak and desolate future; and sadly, with tears and despair, they turned toward the Austrian border and toward a new life and freedom. Until my dying day I will always remember the look of exhaustion, relief and gratitude on the faces of my mother and father when in the freezing cold of winter, on the night before Christmas, on our third attempt, we finally crossed the border into Austria and freedom.

Slowly the refugees of 1956 spread throughout the world. Some even made their way to a city on the shores of Lake Erie called Toledo, Ohio. Here they found a Hungarian community, one that had put roots down in America over many, many years. They found Hungarian churches, Hungarian bars and stores, and they heard their native tongue spoken on the streets. Many of the people of Birmingham opened their homes to these new immigrants, but others wondered who they were and how



would they fit into the community. Little by little the refugees made their lives in Toledo. They founded an organization, "Szabodszog Facos," The Freedom Fighters Club. They made plans, went to school and secured jobs. They met, courted and got married. Gradually they became part of the community.

But always there was the pain, an ache deep in their hearts and a wound in their soul for they had left behind things that would never be recovered: family, friends, the land, the sunshine and the music of life. It seemed to be so different in America.

And slowly time passed. Houses were purchased and children were born. Some moved beyond Birmingham into the suburbs, but the ache was still there. Some, in their struggle to become Americans, changed their names, wouldn't speak Hungarian, stayed away from the Hungarian neighborhood and its events; but they couldn't forget because the ache, the ache was still there. Others took the opposite tack. They worked hard to preserve their heritage, to teach at least a few words of Hungarian to their children, a Csardas dance step or a song, and this made them proud. Proud, not of being Hungarian, but now of being Hungarian-Americans. The ache dulled a little, it was no longer so sharp, but the ache was still there.

They became citizens of the United States, took their first return trips to their homeland to see family and friends, to grieve over the graves of their loved ones; and then they returned to America, for Toledo was now their home. But the ache would never really disappear.

Many years have passed. Some of the children of the refugees now have children of their own, most with little knowledge of their parents' language and just a little understanding of what happened in 1956.

Forty years have passed since the refugees came to this city. Most often, they knew no one. Perhaps they did not even know where this city and this neighborhood were located on the map. And as the ache and pain of leaving their homeland began to fade and as their love and comfort of now being Hungarian-Americans grew, they began to become an integral part of this community. In many ways the "'56ers," the refugees, brought new excitement, energy and commitment to the Hungarian-American community of Toledo, to the Birmingham neighborhood and to our city and nation.

Perhaps after forty years it is time to recognize these contributions and acknowledge that they truly are a part of this community. Their commitments to the community

and this neighborhood, are many. They act as leaders in their churches. They were the founders and original leaders of the Hungarian Club. They have revived and nurtured a Hungarian dance group. They and their children have experienced success in the business community of our city.

Consider merely the business life in our city. The following are but a few of the '56ers' and later refugees who have built successful businesses in our community:

- ☞ The Takacs family and Takacs Meat Markets
- ☞ Louis and Elizabeth Szodi and the Budapest Restaurant
- ☞ Dela Dobo and his textile company
- ☞ George Ferenc and Blue Line Remodeling
- ☞ Steve Mayor and Regal Tool
- ☞ A.J. Szigeti and his Security Service, Real Estate Investments, and now Zsuzska's Restaurant
- ☞ Attila Roka and his successful manufacturing career
- ☞ Louis Simon and his remodeling business
- ☞ Karl Borko and K&T Machine
- ☞ Jozsef and Marianne Polhe and The Pohle Tool Co.
- ☞ The Ujvagi family and E & C Manufacturing

and many, many others.

And now after four decades, the children of these refugees and often their grandchildren have added their contributions to our community as doctors, accountants, university administrators, business owners, teachers, and many other professions, even as candidates and elected officials.

It is worthwhile to remember these contributions, particularly today as the U.S. Congress and this country seems to be swept by anti-immigration fervor. We should, as a society do everything to eliminate illegal immigration, but we must also never forget that this country was made up of immigrants and we must be careful how we address the immigration issue. Too often in American what we want to do is close the door after we have arrived.

There are many families in Toledo today with unique stories of their lives in Hungary, their escape across the border, their lives in the refugee camps, and their immigration to the U.S. We must not lose the stories of the refugee families. We need to know and understand their lives. Our community must never forget.

I cannot conclude without saying a few words about my mother and father and of the sacrifices they made, the dangers they faced, and of the life they built for their children, grandchildren, and us.

My mother and father, with four children, carrying the youngest on their backs, stepped into the unknown. They turned towards the west with nothing but a potty, and a briefcase, a bottle of rum, a micrometer and vernier caliper (the tools of my father's trade), and the holy cross they received at their wedding. They were determined to escape. It took them three attempts before successfully crossing the border to Austria and freedom. Nearly freezing, never giving up, in increasing danger as the Soviet soldiers started heavy patrolling of the Austria-Hungarian border, they brought us across the border and eventually to the land of opportunity, Toledo, Ohio.

My father is the epitome of what is good about the free enterprise system. He owned a small business in Hungary which made analytical balances. It was nationalized by the communists. Yet he didn't give up. He set up a small plastic mold press in our kitchen and began to make parts to sell to try and make ends meet.

Enduring great hardship and danger, he brought his family to the United States, and within less than a year he had a small lathe set up in the basement of our house on Bakewell St. and after working 60 hours a week at his job, he would come back to that basement, working until midnight to start a new business.

Since 1958, he has been a part of the small business community of Toledo; and today at the age of 81, he is still at work every day guiding his sons in a business that serves American industry and exports specialty equipment around the globe.

My mother and father gave their lives for their children, left a homeland and way of life they will never forget, worked night and day, my father at two jobs, my mother at cleaning homes in the early years, to give their children the opportunity and promise of America.

Their children continue to contribute to our community--at The University of Toledo Community and Technical College; in the family business; at our neighborhood churches; in sports, such as soccer; in the artistic community, including The Toledo Repertory Theater; and even in our city's political life.



And now their grandchildren continue the tradition. A niece has returned to Budapest, for the last three years has served as a teacher of English, and now is an Administrative Assistant in a British-Hungarian joint venture. How fantastic it is that the next generation is helping to make the homeland of their parents and grandparents a democratic and free enterprise nation. The circle is closing.

The refugees, the '56er's, have arrived, they have become part of their communities, and they have contributed to them.

Since 1989, the changes that have been occurring in Hungary are now also bringing the land of our birth into the western community of nations. The Iron Curtain has collapsed. Decency has returned and the slow task of rebuilding a nation, a nation of values with a respect for what is, right is progressing. The integration of Hungary into NATO through the Partnership for Peace is moving forward. The building of networks of people between Hungary and America is ever increasing, such as the nationally recognized Toledo, Ohio/Szeged, Hungary Sister City program.

It is hard to believe the number of changes that have occurred over such a short period of time in the country of our birth. As the 40th Anniversary of the Revolution draws near, a new era is unfolding, both in Hungary as well as in our country. We are no longer immigrants and refugees. We are Americans, unique Americans with a special story, but Americans nevertheless. Our children now have the opportunity to participate and to contribute to Hungary's revitalization.

We, as a community, are now challenged as to how to preserve and promote the vitality of our Hungarian-American community, not through new immigrants coming to America, but through new means of involvement and commitment from second and third generation Hungarian-Americans.

The next decade will be exciting, challenging and critical. But as we look to the future, we must never forget the past. For those of us who are '56ers, the refugees, the pain, the ache may continue to be dulled, but will always be there. In our hearts and souls there is a place where we will always know the pain of leaving the land of our birth, our families, and the everyday pleasures of life, for the unknown. We have become part of you, we are truly American-Hungarians now, but we--and our children and grandchildren and community--must never, never forget!



For me, nearly forty years have passed since my family and I came to America and Toledo. And while I am proud of becoming an American, I will always remember the land of my birth.

On one of my visits back to Hungary, I learned that there was a weed-infested corner of the Kerepesi Cemetery in Budapest where some of those who had died for the revolution were buried. By December of 1956 the revolution was over, but some of the grave markers had 1961 and 1962 dates on them. That is because the communists, claiming to be a government of laws, imprisoned children fifteen and under who had taken part in the revolution, waited for them to become of age, and then hung them. Over two hundred and twenty freedom fighters were executed by the communists.

We must never permit such atrocities to happen ever again.

A writer once said:

*"A country begins to die when they rewrite her history.  
A nation dies when it forgets it has a history."*

We must never forget.



# Pete Vas Jr.

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I graduated from Birmingham School in 1943. I then entered Waite High School where I was a starting right guard on their football team of 1945 and 1946. We were Ohio State Champions for both of those seasons. I then graduated high school in 1947.

That same year, I joined the Army and I was given an Honorable Discharge after completing my service. After my discharge, I was given an athletic grant for football at the University of Toledo. I left after the freshmen football season ended. In the spring of 1950, I boxed in the Golden Gloves Tournament as a heavyweight in the Toledo Sports Arena. I wound up losing in the second round on a TKO—a memorable experience. Shortly afterward I received an athletic grant at the University of Washington in Seattle, where I played football for three seasons.

After two years, I transferred to Stetson University in Deland, Florida where I completed my Bachelor of Science degree in February of 1955. That same year, I married my Stetson sweetheart. (We eloped in Monroe, Michigan.) We are still happily married.

I have three super children whose births I list among my most significant dates. Ted is a Navy commander and pilot. Vicky Jo is an engineer with a large firm in Jacksonville, and Pamela is a graduate of nursing school.

In 1966, I finished my Master's in Education at the University of Mississippi, specializing in Administration and Supervision. I was given my first head football coaching job in 1957 at Bishop Kenny High School in Jacksonville. I left the private school system in 1966. I was appointed Dean at Englewood High School in 1969 and then in 1978, I opted to move into the athletic director position. In 1993, I retired.

## **Parents and Childhood**

My father, Pete Vas, died in October of 1969. He was born in Rechki, Hungary in 1905. My mother, Rosemary Fejes, was born in 1907 in Buffalo, New York. She passed away April 12, 1996 and was laid to rest next to Dad in Oregon Cemetery.

My parents were married in Saint Stephen's Church. My mother's side of the family, the Fejes, were loyal parishioners there. My mother was a master cook. I watched Mom cook for years and I have taped many of her recipes.

We lived on Collins Park Avenue in a 1917, Depression-style bungalow which my mother owned until her death. It had no basement, no bathroom, and no hot water. We lived in the kitchen and slept in tiny bedrooms, which were unheated in the winter. In my early grade school days, my mother would take my dunyha (a huge, downed, puffy bed covering) and hold it in the hot oven for a few minutes. Then we would quickly run to my bedroom and she would pile this gigantic, warm comforter over me. This worked well when the room temperature was at least 50 degrees.

When I was in grade five, I insisted that Mom open up the other rooms so we could start using the entire house. There was a large stove which radiated warmth in the hallway that connected the kitchen to the front room. She agreed and I can not express how comforting it was to come home winter nights from the movie or the Collins Park Pond where we would ice-skate or play hockey, to a totally warm house.

There was no busing in those days. Many times, I would cut through the golf course in the snow drifts just counting the minutes until I would get to school so I could get warm and dry out. As a youngster, that was just the way it was, and it was certainly an adventure.

I had many friends at school and a few very close ones. Birmingham School emptied each day from twelve to one for lunch. I lived too far away to walk home and back, so my dad made arrangements for me to eat at Rihaceks Bar, across from the Tivoli. That was great and it gave me lots of time to spend with pals before school resumed at one o'clock.

## **School**

My memories of school are very positive. I don't think I ever missed a day of school when I attended Birmingham. I can say the same for my days at Waite High School,



except for the occasional game of hooky, which we would play so we could take in a movie downtown.

School today is completely different than it was years ago. In my day, we were on a mission. There were hundreds of us who could see the struggle for survival going on around us. We saw it reflected in our friends and relatives. The only door that was open to us was education. Even though we would occasionally grumble, “I hate school,” it was only peer talk. In the classrooms, it was all business. As I reflect on this, I vividly recall that not one of my classmates from kindergarten through eighth grade dropped out. Members of my Birmingham class grew to be lawyers, doctors, and educators.

Today, elementary students are choked with material things and this only gets worse as they move into high school (they have cars, clothes with logos, etc.) As a result, the majority of school children today have mostly social and self-gratifying pursuits on their minds. Until today’s youth realize what it is going to take (mentally) to make a living in the coming century—very little can be said to help them.

## **Holidays**

My family did not celebrate holidays or birthdays the entire time I was in elementary school through high school. Dad had to deliver milk every day despite snow, sleet, or illness. We just did not have time for them. I have always worshipped the ground my parents walked on. I know how very hard they worked and sacrificed. We were very close. We did, however, go to many Hungarian picnics in the summer, and this was great fun.

Thank God for the Tivoli Theater and Collins Park. I was able to attend the Friday night movie, the Saturday night movie, and the matinee on Sunday, every weekend. The price was right. Tickets were only 15 cents. We also went swimming everyday in the summer at the Collins Park Pool and we went ice-skating and played hockey on the pond in the winter.

## **Work/ Military**

Outside of helping Dad with his milk route, I never really held a time clock job when I was young. The most fun I ever had working was during my summers in college was when I worked out of the iron workers’ local #55. It was hard work, yet it was very rewarding. It also paid very well so I was able to have great weekends, etc.

I was only seventeen years old when I entered the military. Part of my first assignment was working in the Officers' Club at the Pentagon. What an experience for a green, seventeen year old from Birmingham! I met Andy Farkas there (in Washington D.C.) Andy, who grew up in Birmingham, played for the Redskins for several seasons. He was responsible for my playing football for the military district of Washington. What an experience playing against several All-Americans in that league.

## **Hobbies**

Like all Hungarians, we had a garden. Since we lived across the street from a golf course, I learned the game, etc. I also loved to go fishing a lot, with my Dad and pals. We also went sledding and ice skating in the winter. The radio was "it." We used it to tune in *Lux Theater*, *The Shadow*, *Jack Armstrong*, *I Love a Mystery*, *Little Orphan Annie*, and *Sherlock Holmes*. We listened to all those broadcasts. There was nothing like radio in the 30's and 40's.

We also loved to attend the Tivoli. It was owned by the Rihacek family. It was an absolute monument to entertainment for all of Birmingham. I realize many old neighborhoods have movie houses, but there was nothing like the Tivoli. All ages filled the seats every weekend and during the week.

## **Closing Statements**

I really believe in the concept of retirement. We are only mortals and "work until you drop" doesn't make much sense to me. There should be at least twenty years of our lives set aside for personal priorities, where the clock is not relevant. We need time for travel, hobbies, and family.

In order to earn this, people need to understand their assets and limitations. This means practicing solid work ethics and frugality. This is not to say that I recommend being a scrooge. It is simply important to produce honest work. If these basics are followed, most all objectives are certainly attainable.

# Martha (Boden) Young

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*Interviewed by Randy Nissen*

The known history of my family begins with my great-grandfather, William Ball-Boden. We are not sure if "Boden" was the legal name or not. When we looked back into the records from the early 1800's, the name has been listed as "Ball," "Ball-Bowden" or "Ball-Boden." The records show that William Frederick Ball-Boden was born in 1830 in Yorkshire, England. He was a member of her Royal Majesty's Service, the Army, and he fought in the Crimean War. He was a veteran of the Battle of Balaclava and he was one of the very few people who survived the Charge of the Light Brigade. He served in the British Army for 21 years and then elected to leave. From England, he made his way to Canada where he met and married Mary Ann Smith. William and Mary Ann left Canada and settled in Trenton, Michigan. Together they raised nine children. By that time, the family name was officially "Boden." William died in 1904, at the age of 72, and is buried in Woodlawn Cemetery.

Primarily, my story is going to deal with my grandfather, Thomas Ball Boden. Thomas was the first born son of William and Mary Ann. He was born in 1870 and died in 1944. He was followed by Elizabeth Ann Boden, Frederick William Boden, George William Boden, Gordon Boden, the youngest, and others. Their first arrival in the Birmingham area was around 1889. The 1890 City Directory lists Thomas B. Boden as "ship's carpenter," and simply states his address as "East Toledo."

The question as to why the family left Trenton for Ironville, or Birmingham has surfaced many times. I guess it simply boiled down to the fact that there were more work opportunities for the senior Mr. Boden in the Toledo area. There was a lot of industry developing on Front Street. The ship building industry was really taking hold. Officially, according to the record I have now, the year was 1889 when they arrived; although family history places their arrival earlier.

I realize that the common term now for the businesses and homes by Front Street is Birmingham, but my grandfather always called it Ironville. In his honor, we too referred to the area as Ironville until the day of his death. Anything off of Front Street was Ironville. Later, there developed a delineation between the areas closer to



Toledo (Birmingham) and those further out towards the Presque Isle (Ironville), but to the old-timers, everything was Ironville.

Often, people chose this area because it was the first place in which they could both live and work and felt comfortable. There has been much discussion surrounding the changes in Birmingham. As dirty and grimy as the area seemed to be to outsiders, my great-grandparents (and later on my uncles and grandfather) reflected upon the area as one of great friendliness. It seemed comfortable. Doors were never locked. This was true for many years. People were very honest; or at least tried to be. They kept themselves and their homes clean. They even went so far as to sweep not only their sidewalks, but women would sweep the entire street in front of their property.

My family was concentrated mostly at 350 Craig Street. Later, when Richard and Gordon Ball Boden and brothers left home, they remained close by. Mostly, they resided on Whittmore and Valentine Streets. They all were within easy reach of their parents' home.

My grandparents, Thomas B. and Alta W. Boden, had two children. They were: my uncle, Thomas Hoyt Boden (1902) and my mother, Hilda Elizabeth Boden (1903). They lived on Caledonia. Eventually, they moved to the Utah Street area. They had several addresses because they moved quite frequently. The address that I knew at the time of my birth was 448 Fourth Street. My grandparents had that home for several years and then the Depression came along and they lost it. I would say that my mother and Uncle Hoyt were strongly instilled with my grandparents' values. I feel that I have been as well. I find myself always trying to live up to my perception of their expectations.

## **Ties to Birmingham**

Because his family came from England, my grandfather considered himself different. Instead of being Hungarian and going to Saint Stephen's Roman Catholic Church, he was Anglican or Episcopalian. Grandfather would walk to East Toledo from Birmingham to Saint Paul's Episcopal Church. Even though he didn't have the same religious background as the local church, it was often said that whatever happened locally, the Bodens were there. They were always invited to everything. They were not outsiders. There could be a kind of cliquishness between people from the same areas in Europe who felt more comfortable being together, but that was never a problem for my family. Maybe it was because they were there to greet others when they came to the U.S. that they had such a strong feeling of solidarity. I also learned



later on that my grandfather would frequently return to Birmingham and meet with his old neighbors and fellow workers from the shipyards. He maintained a lot of strong ties.

## **Birmingham Industry**

According to our family history, for a very brief time, my grandfather, Thomas Ball Boden, worked at Malleable Industries on Front Street. We have a photo that appears as if it is really him. There is a sign within the photo which reads: Malleable Castings; however, it is an old snap-shot and no one in the picture has been identified. As it stands, he was listed as an employee of Craig Shipbuilding Company. Later, it became American Shipbuilding Company. My grandfather is listed in the directory as a ship's carpenter. He was really a master carpenter. My grandfather and his brothers who worked at the shipyards, basically lost their hearing by the time they were thirty. They told us many stories about the work they did on the ships. There were men in the holds of boats where there was a lot of riveting going on. So, it was an extremely noisy place to work.

The Boden family was very poor at this time and my grandfather needed special tools to work on the boats. Since he couldn't afford the quality and strength of the tools that he needed, he made his own. The collection is quite substantial. Presently, the tools are on display at the Oregon-Jerusalem Historical Society Museum. They are unique. I don't know how he used them. They are extremely heavy to me. I guess my hands are smaller, but just holding them and trying to wield them a few times is tiring. Yet he used them for long hours every single day.

## **Grandfather's Funeral**

Grandfather died in 1944. It devastated all of us because it was so unexpected. We had many visitors at The Parks Funeral Home. Many of them were from what my grandfather would have called his "old days" in Ironville. At that sad occasion, many of the neighbors and the men that my grandfather worked with on the boats, told stories relating how my grandfather had helped them and their families adjust to life in the United States. Grandfather was a quiet man, but he exuded strength. He wasn't someone who had to raise his voice to be heard. He was not a tall or big man, but when he walked into a room, his presence was felt. There were so many wonderful stories about him. If there was an accident on one of the boats, he was first to help. If someone was needed to explain the rules and regulations of working there to the men who were having difficulty understanding, he would be the one who

would help them through those difficult times. He would loan them tools so they could work, because most of the time, the men were expected to own their own tools. Tools weren't routinely provided for them simply based on employment at the shipbuilding company. There are numerous stories which circulate about the help that the family gave to people in the neighborhood. My grandfather built furniture out of any wood he could get his hands on. It was brought to our attention that, often, he would be down in the basement on Craig Street, or in the house building or repairing something. But it was something that would be taken to another home, something that somebody else needed.

The interesting thing about his funeral was that my grandmother didn't know a lot of these men who came from the "old days" (1890's-1900's). My grandparents were married in 1901, but grandfather still worked at the ship yard. As they moved further into town, my grandfather and his friends didn't visit each other's homes. But when his old friends saw his obituary, or when they heard of his death, they flocked to the funeral in large numbers. Many of the men, my grandmother didn't know, and they started to explain not only their names but where they lived and why they were there. They said they had all been together at one time, and that grandfather always made sure to go back to the neighborhood to visit them. They said that they just could not let him die without paying their last respects. It was such a stunner for us because my grandmother was not aware of all of his working background. He never spoke much about it. However, he and my mother, Hilda Boden were very close and many times when he would return home from visiting these friends, he would tell my mother with whom he had visited and how they were doing.

My family never had a car, so my grandfather would walk back to Birmingham. It was that important to him. There was a trolley and later on, a bus services, but to him, it was a mark of honor that he used to walk back and forth to Birmingham from East Toledo.

What came across from the visitors to the funeral home was how much my great-grandparents had given back to the community. I remember they also said that while it was important to my great-grandparents to welcome newcomers, it meant a lot to them that they were in received to Birmingham when they moved down from Trenton. They had not been in this country long and this was quite important to them. This reinforced the type of life I was familiar with in East Toledo as a whole. My family and I were overwhelmed after hearing stories of my great-grandparents, grandfather and great uncles. We got the feeling that even as my grandparents and

great-uncles moved away from Front Street, their strong feelings for the area did not diminish.

## **Language and Culture**

One thing that was rather disturbing to my grandfather was that as the years passed, when he would go back to Birmingham to visit, he found that the families and the children were losing their native languages. I remember growing up it was not considered proper to have two languages. It was thought that once you came to this country, you should drop your native tongue and immediately speak English. This phenomenon now of tracing roots and getting back to native languages was not considered the proper thing to do. Grandfather remarked on it at the time, but I didn't think much about it. I just thought all the families were like my own family. Obviously, this wasn't the case.

I remember some descriptions of clothing in a book I had found at the Locke Library when I was very small. It was a book about Hungary. It showed some wonderful clothing, costumes and pictures. We brought it home and my mother asked my grandfather to go through the book with me. I remember this very clearly because I couldn't imagine anyone wearing these clothes. Grandfather pointed to various men's and women's clothing and he clarified when and where Hungarians would wear those outfits. I was learning a little about Birmingham without really realizing it. Everything that was a part of his early life stayed with him. I think it had a very profound effect on him.

## **Why Birmingham?**

People have always asked me why my family settled in Birmingham. The reason was that there were job opportunities. It was a very economical and reasonable place to live and raise a family. It was also considered a stepping stone. Young families could become established there without having to live there for the rest of their lives.

My grandfather married Alta W. Worrell in 1901, and they lived on Caledonia Street. A few years later, they moved closer into East Toledo. This was before Richard and Gordon had left home, so, they elected to stay closer to their mother. Great-Grandfather Boden had died in 1904 and the other sons felt that Great-Grandmother shouldn't be by herself. So, when she died in 1911, they started to spread their wings a bit further and moved farther away. Although many families used Birmingham as a stepping stone to move up to more affluent areas, many



families felt that their roots were established in Ironville and they continued to live there (as do many of their descendants today). My family always remained devoted to its early years in Birmingham and that devotion stayed with my relatives for the rest of their lives. It was a very great surprise to me to find out how often my grandfather returned to Birmingham.

## **School**

When I went to school, it was never the teachers' faults. If a student erred, that student was held responsible. That was true for all of us growing up. For example, I attended Raymer and there we did not have to go back to school on the Monday following a holiday. The next year, I said to a group of classmates, "Why should we be going to school? Last year, we had this day off." I was in the eighth grade and had never done anything like that before in my life. Literally, my entire class didn't go to school and I was one of the two or three culprits responsible for it. My mother was coming home from work and she saw me walking across the Cherry Street Bridge at a time when I was supposed to be in school.

I confessed that I was the ring leader. My mother asked me what I was going to do about it, since this was unacceptable behavior. The next morning, I found myself in the office of Miss Moring, the principal, explaining that I was the culprit. I told her that I was upset because we had to go to school, but that I didn't expect everyone to stay home. I was so upset at the enormity of what happened that I was physically sick all night. I was expected to know right from wrong and I was also expected to know what to do about it. The real punishment was what I had done to my stomach because I was such a mess. I was crying and was close to vomiting. I was a physical and emotional wreck.

## **Leisure Time**

In the small amount of time that could be considered "leisure time," men and boys in the family would swim off the docks on Front Street. They also played on ball teams. If something was going on at Saint Stephen's, everyone was invited, particularly if you were friends with a parishioner.

Much entertaining was done at home. If you didn't have a lot of money, you would invite people over to your house, or, you would go over to their house. Many evenings were spent on the front porch visiting with neighbors or at ice cream socials. People were very Victorian and did a lot of chores. Monday was wash day,



Tuesday was spent ironing, and Wednesday was the day to clean the house. Whatever the families did, it would take up most of their waking hours. For leisure, they had picnics and took walks, that sort of thing. They did simple things, there was no TV or radio. If the family had a piano, they would gather around it and sing or dance. Pulling taffy was another fun thing that families would do.

When I was growing up, I remember taffy-pulls in the summertime. One time my mother and I were out in the kitchen trying to decide what to do. We couldn't compete with my grandmother in terms of cooking, so, Grandfather came out and asked us to make taffy. I didn't understand what a taffy pull was. The idea of ending up with a ball of candy by pulling and pulling it sounded very strange to me. We didn't really do it, but the two of them started talking about it. It was so funny because I couldn't imagine two adults with something called candy stretched across the room. They made candy by pulling and pulling.

### **Search for Birmingham Roots**

I have been doing some research to try to discern as much information as I can, but I believe my family made a wise choice in moving to Birmingham. The neighborhood was certainly average or blue-collar, but there were good neighbors, jobs, and tremendous memories of community. When I was reading the second volume on Birmingham, I got quite a feel for what my own family must have experienced. For instance, they were invited to events at Saint Stephen's even though they were outsiders. I found growing up in East Toledo, that it really didn't matter where you or your family came from, it was just important that we were all there together. It wasn't until later that I realized the wonderful diversity we had in East Toledo, but we all seemed to fit in very well together. This is the impression my family seemed to have living in Birmingham.

### **Grandfather**

One story my family knows about, my grandfather was too humble to tell himself. One year, there was a terrible snowstorm in Toledo during which he and another man were walking across the Cherry Street Bridge. The other man was not feeling well and was having difficulty walking and the snow was getting worse. The drifts were getting higher and my grandfather, who was only five feet and ten inches tall, picked up this man, who was his size, and carried him home to Birmingham.

He couldn't stand Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He would not allow the name to be mentioned in his house. I think, possibly, he disliked him so because he felt FDR was encouraging people to be dependent. Grandfather stressed self-reliance. I don't think he liked the way he saw Roosevelt doing things. He was brought up to believe that it was important to help people to help themselves. He was very keen and farsighted about things. I was always at the kitchen table when the family talked (even at age three) and I remember some pieces of conversations, but as soon as FDR's voice would come on the radio, the radio went off. Everyone in the family understood that the name was not mentioned. He wanted no part of the man.

He was an extremely devout churchman and had a strong belief in supporting the community. Grandfather was a lay reader at Saint Paul's for many years. He also taught and was superintendent of the Sunday school. He was also a great reader and he read any book he could get his hands on. There are a number of books in the family that were obtained through Grandfather.

When my grandparents lost their home, it literally killed my grandfather. He had an enormous amount of pride. During the Depression and World War II, everyone was caught up with these momentous occasions. At the age of 72, the year before he died, Grandfather tried to sign up for the United States' Army. He went down and explained that he had two good feet and two working hands, and he wanted to do whatever the country needed. He was willing to sign up. How many people today would do that? He knew they wouldn't send him overseas, but he just knew that they could find something for him to do. That is, essentially, what was instilled into me, that duty and responsibility always come first. Personal pleasure should be the last thing considered. This doesn't mean that no one had a good time or that no one laughed, but if there was a choice, duty was foremost.

If my grandfather could see our society today, I think it would kill him. He was very English. He was American too, but that "Englishness" was still present in that first American generation. He had great pride and he was head of the family. He was expected to support his family, so when the Depression hit and he had difficulty maintaining a home and getting a job, it was extremely hard on him. It could have destroyed a lesser person, but he was brought up to never complain or cry. He showed emotion. Not in a huggy-bear sort of way. He showed that he cared very quietly. It was always clear that his presence made a positive difference.

## **A Remarkable Woman**

My mother spoke seven languages. She learned Italian, French and Spanish in school. When I lived in Austria and Vienna, I had great difficulty with German. Since English was the only language that I knew, she learned German so she could translate the various papers that I would send home to her from Vienna.

Mother had close Chinese friends through the years, whom she met while she was at the University of Michigan. They were a very important part of her life. Years later, she helped these friends come to America permanently. Even though these friends spoke English, she studied Chinese to be able to converse with them in their own language. She wasn't that fluent; she was just a beginner.

She developed an interest in languages because my great uncle, Dr. William Worrell, her uncle, taught Coptic and Aramaic and was a specialist in semantics. Aside from this influence, my mother thought she should learn more "key" languages. She also studied Hebrew, Arabic, Greek and Russian. While taking evening classes in Russian at Scott High School, the teacher was upset with her because she was ahead of her classmates. He sent her home and said, "If you want to come back for the examination, do it, but you don't really need this class." At the time of her final illness, she was working on her own notebook in both the Greek and Russian alphabets. Here was a lady, who was dangerously close to death, and the minister of Saint Mark's Episcopal Church on Collingwood would come to visit her and they would converse in Greek. He said it was one of the few opportunities he had to use the Greek language. She worked and lived with her parents and helped them. All her brilliance was not really allowed to blossom the way it should have.

## **The Unspoken Bond**

One thing I remember was that my grandfather and great uncles would not tolerate anything negative being said about Birmingham. They were very defensive because they knew what it was like to live there and they knew the kind of people who lived there. They also were aware that certain areas of the city which were considered more elite and fashionable often looked down on Ironville or Birmingham. There was a deep rooted, unspoken agreement among the residents to never say anything bad about their original roots in Toledo.

I once retraced my family's steps through Birmingham. As I was going up and down the streets trying to locate the addresses where they had lived on Craig Street, I felt a

sensation. It wasn't deja-vu because I wasn't even familiar with the area. It was more a sense of community. I often wished that as a youngster, I could have accompanied my grandfather on his visits back to Birmingham. That is one of my greatest regrets because I think it would have been a cherished memory.









